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Gilt-Edged Dick, the Sport-Detective.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK," "ROSEBUD ROB," "JACK HOYLE," "CANADA CHIEF," ETC., ETC.



AS COOL AS AN ICEBERG APPEARED GILT-EDGED DICK, JUST A FAINT TRIFLE OF A SMILE LURKING UPON HIS LIPS,
AS THE MAJOR STRUGGLED TO HIS FEET.

Gilt-Edged Dick,

THE SPORT-DETECTIVE;
OR,
The Road-Agent's Daughter.

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CHAPTER I.

THE GIRL FROM IDAHO.

LEADVILLE, Colorado—the Mecca of the miner, the gambler, the ruffian, and the generally adventurous class to be found in every mining town.

Leadville—the electric city of the Far West—the carbon town, nestling down in the Rocky Mountains, far up near the timber belt. Leadville with its many rude cabins and shanties, bathed in the happy spring sunlight, and two men standing on the veranda of the Tontine House, engaged in spirited conversation—two men so different in appearance as to attract attention from a keen observer.

The taller of the twain—the blonde-haired, fair-faced German, with immense circumference of waist, was "Colonel" Jacob Schwartz, a politician, a restaurateur, and a mine-owner, to some small extent.

The second party was a dark-visaged little man of uncertain age, between thirty and forty, conspicuous for the monstrous size of his mustache, which hid a sensual mouth, and for the rich quality of his attire, which was cut in the latest style, and as a whole outfit, taken together with the diamond pin, ring and gold chain he wore, was extraordinarily "nobby" for the mines.

Major Dudley Doud, this gentleman was registered at the Tontine, but then, nearly every man was dubbed "Major" "Colonel" or "Captain;" consequently it was hard to tell who deserved the titles of rank.

Major Doud's antecedents were wholly unknown to the people, yet he held a share of popular estimation among them—was profuse with his money, and this liberality of course reached to the hearts of the middle and lower classes of the people.

A politician was the major, clear to the backbone. A new sheriff was to be supplied to the town of Leadville, to fill the vacancy made by the road-agents of the mountains, and right ready and willing and eager was the major to step into his predecessor's shoes. For an office like that of sheriff was not to be despised, in the carbon region, where there are ways that are dark, and tricks that are vain, so far as the little matter of making money is concerned.

But at times in the political career of the major, it came to pass that he was teetotally "strapped" of this world's filthy lucre, and he had to borrow of such pilgrims as had sufficient confidence in him to believe he would ever pay it back.

Unfortunately for him, these were not numerous, for since his debut in Leadville's electric town the major had achieved the repute of being an excellent borrowing medium, but a poor "returning board," except when he was clerk of elections.

To the colonel had the major finally appealed, this morning, for a loan, after having lost his pile at a faro bank the previous night.

But the good-natured German manager of the Tontine shook his head.

"I don'd vas got any money, mine friend," he said, with a comical attempt at seriousness. "I don'd vas got so much ash half or von dollar. I vas clean gon' de'troke."

"Bah! that is a poor excuse to get out of loaning me a few," the major replied, his calmness unruffled. "Now, see here, Jacob, I know you've got lot's of money, and why can't you accommodate me for a couple of weeks, until I can draw on my New York bankers? Do you suppose I'd wiggle out of an honest debt?"

"I don'd vas dink ash you would, major, put I tells you dat I don'd vas got so much money ash von half dollar."

"Then of course I cannot borrow it of you," the major said, stroking his huge mustache rather impatiently. "Don't know where I could borrow a sum, do you? Of course my election over Fulton is a certainty, but I reckon it wouldn't be any harm to shove a few dollars into the pockets of certain individuals to clinch their votes for me."

"Colonel" Schwartz laughed oddly.

"You pees von pig fool, major," he said, with

a knowing nod, "when you t'ink ash how you git to pesherrif. I'll bet you swi glasses of lager ag'in a belt mit der smaller dot you vas left clear out mit der shade trees. You d'ink you ish popular, but Fulton—he will see you, and go you ten or twenty better, yust like rolling off of von beer keg."

"Ha! ha! you will be deceived then, my good friend, for the contest at the polls this morning is not spirited, and is all going for me."

"Ve vill see apout dot. Look ofer dar, an' tell me if you see dot girl a-goin' down ther street?"

The major did look, but did not seem to see any one but men.

"I see no girl, nor any one having a resemblance to a girl, except that young sprig of a chap over there who looks like a sport."

"Yaw! dat ish de one," the colonel nodded, his eyes twinkling; "dot ish Idaho Kit, dot pe—Idaho Katrina, fer long—and she's yust sailed into town ter attend der election."

The major turned to gaze at the personage a second time.

If a girl it was, she was attired in the garments of the opposite sex, and stylishly clothed, too, from patent-leather cavalry boots that reached to the knees, to the jaunty, narrow-rimmed sporting hat upon a head of wavy hair.

In addition to her other garments she wore a "b'iled" shirt and vest, while a belt at her waist contained a single pistol.

With a peculiar, independent swagger this girl sauntered up the street, occasionally twirling the small cane she carried, and puffing at a dainty cigarette that was held in a diamond-set meerschaum-holder, between her pearly white teeth.

The eyes of Major Dudley Doud sparkled greedily, as he watched her pass along on the opposite side of the street.

Leadville boasted of perhaps as many eccentric females as any other mining town, but among them all, there was none who could bear comparison with this new-comer—this Idaho Kit, as Colonel Schwartz had named her.

Certainly there were none more pretty in form—none who could equal the rare grace and sprightliness of movement.

And when a glance was taken at the fair, piquant face—the perfectly-molded, yet mischievous-expressioned face, with its dancing blue eyes, its sweetly-tempting mouth, that could be firm with resolution, or relaxed in smiles, in an instant of time; the well-poised head, and its wealth of wavy brown hair that fell over the rounded shoulders—such a picture did the major contemplate, from the "stoop" or veranda in front of the Tontine.

"By St. Christopher! the girl's as pretty as a picture," he said, turning to the girthy, good-natured German. "It is a decided relief to see one handsome woman. Who is she, friend Schwartz?"

"Idaho Kit, or Kate, youst as you please, major. I don'd vas know, so much apoud her as a pin's head, only vat reaches me py hear-say. Better ash how you keep away from her, my friend?"

"And why?"

"Ca'se dey say she vas von pad customer, un can lick ash many as fourteen pilgrims, and not half try."

"What! that woman fight? she looks more like a hot-house flower going to a masquerade."

"Yaw—dot's where dey all make von pig misdake. Dey t'ink ash how she is somebody's forgot-all-she-knows, and dar's vere dey git slipped up."

"Then she is not to be fooled around?" the major queried, musingly.

"Not much, Katrina!" Schwartz answered, emphatically. "Off you vos proud mit a sore skull, or a banged eye, better you try to insinuate ter Kitty from Idaho. Pet swi schooners of lager ter a poor cigar dot you git so mooch as you can't swaller."

"And you say this girl is coming in here to run this election?"

"Yaw, I dink dat ish her game. She will vote for Fulton, an' lick the galoot as sez nay."

"We will see about that," the major said, and flipping a nickel into the colonel's hand he received therefor a poor cigar, which he lighted, and set off down the street in the direction of the post-office, for it was toward this that Idaho Kit seemed to be aiming.

It was election day in Leadville's electric city—not the regular election, but a sort of meeting of the people to fill the vacancy of sheriff which the road-agents of the mountains had made.

Instead of appointing an officer in the usual way, the people had cried for an election, and

have it they would. As Leadville was the principal town in the county, the other mining camps submitted to the arrangement of their metropolis.

The polls were pitched in a vacant store on Chestnut street, and here those of each political party, who had any choice in the election of a new sheriff, were permitted to vote.

No distinction was there made of the classes, or the sexes, for women voted as well as men, and as often as they could repeat, without detection and arrest.

Each candidate had his friends, and on the outside of the store they had assembled, to discuss the meritorious qualities of each man, and "cuss" the bad ones, while betting and fighting were the order of the hour.

A dense crowd was gathered in front of the polls, when the major arrived; Idaho Kate stood a little apart from the rest, leaning idly against an owning-post, surveying the crowd and the scene with cool indifference.

While, although she was by no means a stranger in the town, she was the center of attraction for many pairs of admiring eyes.

Major Dudley Doud was in some degree a vain man, and carried the idea that he was a thoroughbred lady's man—an irrepressible, as it were, that the average feminine heart could not withstand.

Conquests were therefore extremely to his liking.

Doffing his hat, politely, he approached the Girl Sport, graciously.

"Excuse me, lady, but I presume it is your intention to poll a vote at this election," he said, in smooth tones which he deemed winning.

"Well, I reckon you're purty solid, there," Idaho Kit replied, off-handedly. "Spect you've got some objections, eh?"

"Well, that depends somewhat on whom you vote for," the major replied, complacently, as he twisted the ends of his huge mustache to a point. "If you vote for Dudley Doud, I will see that you have a put in. If you vote for Fred Fulton, it shall be my duty to challenge your vote."

"Oh! you will, eh?" the girl observed, cynically. "Mebbe you will, and ag'in mebbe you won't. Perhaps you'll find yerself makin' mudpies out o' the wrong puddle, about that time."

"Oh! I guess not. I think you'll find it to your pecuniary advantage, if not to your social, to poll your vote for me."

"For you?" Kit interrogated.

"Exactly—for me!"

"Then you call yourself Doud, do you?—you aspire for the sheriffship?"

"It does me proud to say yes. My name is Major Dudley Doud, and I am the popular candidate for the office."

"You are?"

"I am, most assuredly."

A sarcastic little laugh escaped the cherry lips of Idaho Kit. An observer might have noticed that she was making game of the would-be sheriff, but he evidently was ignorant of the fact, himself.

"Mebbe you don't mind telling a pilgrim where you picked up that ar' handle of 'major'?"

"Certainly not," the major replied, graciously. "It is an honorable title that was conferred upon me in the Union army."

"You were in the army, then?"

"I was, certainly."

"Ever in a battl?"

"Oh! yes—in a great many bloody engagements."

"I suppose you ran, when they began to fight?" Idaho Kit suggested, sarcastically.

The major now for the first time perceived that he was being "took in," and a volley of profanity from his lips was the result.

"See here, you little vixen," he growled, looking as savage as he knew how, "I want to know what you mean."

"Do you? Well, I can't say, for my part," the girl replied, coolly. "While you were speaking I was in a reverie—thought I could see a jackass—and when I come to awaken, it seems to me I am purty near right."

A few snickers from the bystanders attested to the fact that they were enjoying the matter hugely, which fact seemed doubly to incense the major.

"Blast me! if your insolence isn't intolerable!" he cried, furiously. "It is evident that your bringing up has been sadly neglected, girl."

"That is your opine, eh?" Idaho Kit replied, with a laugh. "Well, all I've got to say is that if you knew as much in one year as a coyote knows in a minute, the small space which ne-

tare left for brains in your skull would be tenanted for the first time since your birth. And now jest you look heer: I want to warn you that if you come fooling around me, you'll git yourself into trouble. Mebbe I don't look no bigger nor a pint o' cider, ner as ferocious as a cinnamen b'ar, but I'm *hyar* all the same, and don't you forget it! My handle's Idaho Kit, and I don't allow no pilgrim to crowd on me, ner talk about me, if I do wear breeches!"

A slight scowl darkened the major's forehead; the bystanders increased in number, and stood open-mouthed, ready to witness the row if any was to occur.

Lovers, to a man, were they of anything that savored of a fight.

"Curse you!" the major growled. "Just as if I were afraid of a chit like you. If you were wise, or respectable, I'd advise you to go home, instead of coming out here in breeches."

"Just you swaller a part o' that back, blame you!" the girl from Idaho cried, her blue eyes flashing, and out came the pistol from her belt with a click! click! as it was leveled upon the major. "I don't allow any two-footed galoot to sling insinuations at me, and ef I do wear breeches, I paid for 'em an' I kin prove it!"

"Put down your shootin'-iron!" the major snarled. "I hain't said you were not respectable, nor am I going to say so!"

"Very well; you'd better haul in your slack," the girl cried, lowering her weapon to her belt. "I don't take none o' the article from any pilgrim, be he president, guv'nor or Gilpin. I reckon this is a free country, and ef a gal wants to wear breeches, breeches she is goin' ter wear, an' ef she wants ter wear petticoats, et's her ekal privilege. And ef she wants to vote, vote she will, every day in the week and twice on Sunday, without no pilgrim stickin' his fist inter ther pie. And here's the very gal who is goin' ter cast a vote for Fred Fulton!"

CHAPTER II.

THE GILT-EDGED GENTLEMAN.

AND straight toward the polls the eccentric Girl Sport made her way.

Major Dudley Doud then swore roundly, and followed her.

"I'll be blowed if you'll vote!" he hissed, laying a hand upon her shoulder. "This is a fair election, and we don't allow no foreigners to vote, who have not been naturalized."

"Then do ye call me a foreigner?" Idaho Kit demanded, with a contemptuous laugh. "Fer ef ye do, I kin prove that I ain't, and lick you in the bargain."

"You are a blustering brag, like all the rest of your type!" the major retorted. "Barring that you may be an American citizen, Leadville is not your place of abode and you can't vote here."

"I'll bet you a quarter ag'in' a drink of wet groceries, thet I do vote, right hyar, and you ner no other galoot can't stop me. Come, ef you've got any sand, either put up, or shut up!"

And again the plucky girl pushed her way toward the polls.

Major Dudley Doud followed her. He regarded the occasion as highly propitious to display his authority and make an impression, and besides, his bull-dog determination that the Girl Sport should not vote urged him on.

And made him the more ridiculous. As Idaho Kit deposited her vote upon the ballot box, the major stepped up, grim enough to have annihilated her upon the spot.

"I challenge this girl's vote!" he said. "She is not a lawful citizen of the town—is merely a roving vagabond and a—"

Whatever was upon the would-be sheriff's lips, remained unspoken, for a heavy hand descended upon his shoulder, and he was jerked back upon the floor so quickly that he could but gasp in surprise.

No baby fall did the major get either, but a solid crashing descent that made the dust fly.

A cheer went up from the crowd.

This was the first time they had ever seen the major upon his back—moreover, it was the first time they had ever seen the stranger, under whose hands he had fallen.

For the man was a stranger, no Leadville-ite was he, with all his elegant make-up—no citizen of the boss town of the Colorados, with his *biled* shirt, and polished boots.

A man of stalwart muscular frame, he was, whose age might possibly have been between thirty and thirty-five, although he looked even younger to gaze upon.

He was well proportioned in every limb and muscle, with a broad, deep chest, and a pair of shoulders that looked as if molded of iron.

In face you beheld a man whose passions slumbered—a strangely calm and passive face it was, unruffled and unwrinkled—a thoroughly blonde face, with a soft-tinted complexion, and hair, mustache and side whiskers of the veriest sandy hue. Especially were the side whiskers noticeable for their luxuriance and length.

A firm mouth hovered in under the blonde mustache, whose expression now appeared slightly infected with resentment.

The attire of the stranger was perhaps more striking than himself, for it consisted of white duck trowsers, and jacket, white shirt and cavalry top-boots, all of which were fringed with gold gilt gimp, giving to the garments and the wearer a singular appearance.

A white slouch hat upon his head was also fringed in a like manner, which completed the outfit of the "gilt-edged" stranger, save it was a serviceable riding whip he carried in his right hand.

Not alone came this nobby stranger, for by the left hand he led a little girl of seven years—a sweet, sunny-faced little thing she was, neatly clad, and the very image of the man who held her by the hand—who stood towering over the fallen major, who measured his length upon the plank sidewalk in front of the polls.

As cool as an iceberg appeared this stranger, just a faint trifle of a smile lurking upon his lips, as the major struggled to his feet, spitting out a mouthful of dust which he had rooted up.

"Curse you! what do you mean?" he howled, glaring at the cool stranger. "Maybe you did that on purpose, my gilt-edged friend?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if you were correct," the other responded. "I saw you interfering in what was none of your business, and took the liberty to remove you from this lady's path," and the Sport glanced toward Idaho Kit, who was gazing on in evident surprise.

"That lady!" the major grunted, contemptuously—"that lady?"

"Exactly, sir—that lady. Do you dare to say she is not a lady?"

"As far as the daring goes, I should not hesitate to say so, were I so indiscreet as to lower the woman's reputation any further," the would-be sheriff replied, sneeringly. "In this town of Leadville, I judge, and judge correctly, that the popular verdict of honesty and virtue does not cling to the class of females who wear breeches."

"See here, just you close up, now," Idaho Kit cried, her face flushing, and her blue eyes glowing darker. "Ef you don't want me to climb you, and gouge your eyes out, you'd better rope in your slack. I don't want to go to no expense fer funerals, but I shall certainly have to get you measured for a pine box, unless you git out, on a run. Mebbe I don't look as ef I could do it, but I opine hayr's what can lick this hull burg, once I git my mad up."

"You shut up, and I'll attend to your case, when I have leisure," Doud growled, savagely. "For the present, I happen to feel like dealing with this vain popinjay of a Sport who has insulted me!"

"Insulted you? Ha! ha! ha! that's the best joke yet—insulted a jack mule! Ha! ha! ha!"

And the ringing laughter of the Girl Sport rung clear and musical, and put the spectators, of whom there were many, in a better humor. The situation was growing more and more interesting, with the threatened approach of a duel.

The major bit his lip, and scowled darkly, at Kit's thrust, while he cursed furiously under his breath.

This was the first woman, he flattered himself, who had ever dared to brave his anger—who had ever got the best of him; and it was doubly vexatious to his proud spirit because the crowd were drinking in the cream of the show, free of charge.

Furious was the major, beneath a forced exterior of apparent coolness, and bound was he to have revenge upon the gilt-edged Sport for the humiliation of the sprawl in the street. The girl—she could be managed some other time.

"Did I understand you to say you wished anything of me?" the blonde stranger said, glancing at a handsome gold time-piece. "If so, please state your errand, as I have other business than participating in street quarrels.

"Oh! you have!" the major sneered. "Well, sir, you probably know what I want, without my telling you. In this country when one man insults another, the insulted party demands satisfaction, right out in the middle of the street, where all the people can see the fun."

"Yes, sir—out where the people can cheer the winner. Go in, lemons—go in you gilt

edged cuss, an' ef you can't lick that ugly galoot with a hoss's mane on his upper jaw, I'll hire out ter finish the job fer ye!" Idaho Kit cried, enthusiastically. "I know what the major wants, I do—I've seen several galoots jest like him, heretofore. He wants to buck his brains out ag'in' an earthquake, and he'll soon have a chance, you bet."

"My name, or nickname, is Gilt-Edged Dick!" the stranger answered, calmly. "If the major wishes satisfaction, he has but to name his tools."

"Whoop her up, Liza Jane! That's the ther kinder talk ter cum frum a Christyun!" exclaimed a big mule driver, who stood near by, whip in hand. "That's the ther precise language as greets my big ears with soothin' effect, sure's my name's Horrible Hank Hopkins, artistic bull-driver. Right down from Adelaide City I cum, pilgrims, every day in a week en' twice o' Sunday, an' ef ever hooman critter loved a fight, hayr's his dooplicate, frum tooth ter toe-nail. Cum, now, major, set yer sand-pumps to work, and jack up yer courage. That gilt-edged galoot hez advised ye ter nomynate yer tools, and we, yer representative citizens do natterly expect you to do ther squar' thing by us. No common everyday dog-fight must this mutual settlement be, but a hull-souled entertainment—a novelty, ye parseeve!"

"Better git the muleteer ter help ye, major!" Idaho Kit suggested.

"I ask no assistance—no advice at all," the candidate replied, fiercely. "When I call for it, it will be time enough."

"But ye haven't nominated yer weepons, yet," admonished one of the bystanders, who was eager to see the battle begin.

"Then I'll do so. My choice is knives, upa horseback!" the major announced, triumphantly.

"As you choose," Gilt-Edged Dick replies coolly. "I happen to have my animal wit me, and can accommodate you with pleasure."

At this the major stared a little, for he had calculated to mount the stranger upon a poor animal, and thus have the odds of a thoroughbred saddle horse against him. But there was no backing now, and the battle must come off. News had spread all along the crowded main street of the town, of the impending duel between the gilt-edged stranger and the sheriff-candidate, consequently the crowd increased each moment, for it was known that the major was a dead-shot, an excellent knife duelist, and as good a horseman as ever rode the streets of Leadville's metropolis.

And the anticipated result was that the gilt-edged individual would get carved into steaks by the candidate for election.

At his direction, a miner went for the major's horse, but none was sent for the Sport's. Instead, he gave vent to a shrill whistle, that echoed and re-echoed along the streets.

Soon there came an answer in the shape of a whinny, and a superb bay saddle-horse came trotting up the street to where the Sport stood.

A handsomer animal the crowd had never seen in the carbon city, as was evidenced by sundry admiring exclamations; indeed, he was a fine creature, with round supple body—clean, perfectly-contoured limbs, and an eye which possessed something of the smoldering fire that lurked in the eye of the master. Already saddled and stirruped was the horse, but the fact that he wore no bridle seemed to indicate that such an ornament was unnecessary.

Raising the little girl in his left arm, Gilt-Edged Dick vaulted into the saddle with the greatest of ease, apparently, and sat gazing over the crowd, as coolly as if nothing of any importance were about to happen, while the major paced to and fro, excitedly.

Though a great duelist, he was beginning to lose faith in himself, and regard the Sport with suspicion. It had never been his luck to meet a man before who was quite so cool and indifferent in the face of an approaching struggle for life, and the coolness of his opponent seemed to act as a damper to the major's spirits.

Rather doubtful was he as to how the duel would end; perhaps it would be the challenger instead of the challenged who would fall!

The crowd grew denser and larger, excited politicians "cussed and discussed" the merits of the coming affray; many were there who agreed that the major was the best man; but those who supported the ticket of Fred Fulton for sheriff were almost to a man the admirers of Gilt-Edged Dick.

One strong admirer had the Sport, in the person of Idaho Kit. Gratitude of course prompted her interest in him; then too, there was much

in his handsome face and figure and carriage to command a woman's eye and taste.

"I'll bet my head ag'in' a drink o' wet groceries, the Gilt-Edged Dick polished off the major like a five-cent shave!" the girl exclaimed, with a chuckle. "And if he does he can draw on my bank account fer all I'm worth. I reckon Idaho Kit don't allow no pilgrim to fight her battles, 'thout payin' fer the job; not while the Evertown mine pangs out carbon, anyhow. And, Mr. Gilt-Edge, hedn't ye better let me take keev uv that little girl?"

"No, I thank you," Gilt-Edged Dick replied, smiling slightly. "I guess I am' able to take care of Pearl"—with a fond glance at the child which sat before him on the saddle. "She goes with me ever, even to the grave!"

A malicious expression flitted over Major Doud's face, as he ceased his pacing, in order to get a glimpse of the little one. It was an expression such as might have come upon the face of his Satanic Majesty, when brooding over some fearful scheme that had the savor of being a triumph.

Gilt-Edged Dick noticed it—the crowd generally noticed it, and Idaho Kit noticed it, and hastened to make known the fact.

"See hyar, you black-h'arted rascal!" she cried, with sudden vehemence, as she turned upon the major, fiercely, "what infernal thought were it they popped inter yer noddle then? I know, consarn your ugly picture. It occurred to you that by strikin' the child, you could strike the Sport the deepest. Now, you jest try et, if you believe it healthy—jest go an' try it, ef you calculate you know the side o' yer bread the butter's the thickest on—that's all I want you to do, and if I, Idaho Kit, don't prepare you for a fust-class funeral in an anti-resurecktion climate, you may call me a genuine fraud. I'll salivate you, you bet, and so will every man in the gang."

And a cheer from the crowd seemed to be an affirmative answer!

CHAPTER III. THE ENCOUNTER.

THE major made no reply. Whatever were his dark thoughts—his villainous plans, he chose to keep them to himself. The minor soon arrived with his horse, a thoroughbred bay animal, not nearly so clean-limbed as the Sport's, but to all appearances more fiery.

Into the saddle then, the major vaulted, and drew a long shining dirk-knife from his belt.

"Have you your second?" Gilt-Edged Dick asked, almost unconcernedly, as he gazed over the sea of strange faces.

"I will soon choose one," was the reply, as the would-be sheriff, too, gazed about him. "Ah! Hank Hopkins, will you act for me?"

"Waal now, you jest bet," the mule-driver replied; a strange chuckle escaping his lips, "an' ef that Gilt-Edge don't do the fair thing by you cuss me ef I won't let daylight through him."

"An' as I'll play second fiddle fer ther Sport, ef you tech one hair of his skulp, I'll be ther means of causin' you to git measured for a hole in the ground, as sure's my name's Idaho Kit."

And all who heard her had reason to believe that the Girl Sport would do as she said.

For not unknown was she in the metropolis of the mountains, with its hosts of eccentric characters. Shoot would she, when crowded upon or insulted, as had been several times proven, and it required a fair man to handle her in a fight. So said those who knew, and the report had gained general credence.

The arrangements for the duel, progressed.

Jo Dewolf, a worthy citizen of the town, offered to act as third man, or referee, and accordingly ordered the center of the street cleared, for some distance, in order to give the duelists a starting ground.

They then rode off to their posts, from whence they were to start.

Gilt-Edged Dick was quietly cool and self-possessed, with the utmost indifference expressed upon his face. He had raised the little girl upon his leg, and encircled her with his left arm, to prevent her from falling off, while in his right hand he held a common sheath knife—apparently not a Damascus blade, like the major's.

"You'd better let some one take care of the child, Sir Sport," one of the bystanders said, advisedly. "It is simply foolhardiness to imperil the life of that innocent little girl."

"She will not be harmed," Gilt-Edged Dick replied with a confident smile.

"Ready, there?" Jo Dewolf shouted, from the center of the street.

"Ready?" the Sport answered, promptly.

"And you, Doud?" turning in the direction of the major.

"All right—go ahead," was the signal from the major.

"Bully fer Mary! Both men are ready. Now, gentlemen, when I say—one, two, three—and neglect to add 'the rooster crows an' way she goes,' ye'll know I mean bizness, and ther quicker ye go through each other, the less you're liable to spile the hilarity o' ther game. Git ready, now—one—two—three!"

It was the starter.

The major dug the spurs into the flanks of his fiery animal; the Sport simply gave his horse the "go" and then both animals shot out toward each other, swiftly.

It seemed as if they knew what was expected of them, for they aimed straight at each other, with ears laid back, and mouths open in a manner not pleasant to see.

Enemies were they from the start, to all appearances.

Nearer and nearer approached the maddened animals while their riders sat the saddles with their knives clutched in firm grasp.

Nearer—nearer! The crowd surged back to the side of the street in terror, for never had they seen anything half so frightful as the aspect of the furious horses; then came a seeming collision, in which there was a rapid play of knives; then the horses dashed on to the end of the apportioned course.

The men in the saddle had evidently not suffered any particular damage, but the horse of the major was minus one ear, which had nearly been pulled out by the roots, and was still held between the grinning teeth of the Sport's charger. The crowd cheered lustily at sight of the victory, but Jo Dewolf waved them back, and his stentorian voice again awoke the echoes. "Order! This battle ain't over yet. One—two—three, and away she goes."

Again the fighting horses rushed at each other with vicious screams, while the men in the saddles leaned forward with gleaming eyes and knives grasped firm. No play was this.

Nearer—nearer; then the animal of the Sport reared upon its hind legs, and advanced threateningly toward the major. Ere he could escape from the saddle, down came the heavy, iron-shod feet of the horse upon the head and shoulders of his own beast, literally driving it to the ground.

Cheer after cheer went up from the crowd, for never had they seen any thing to equal this. It was a new phase of dueling, and a new phase of equestrian battling.

Game, though, was the major. Extricating himself from the saddle, he rose to his feet, and taking aim, hurled his knife straight at the heart of the Sport.

A tremor of hor or ran through the crowd, for so expert a thrower was the major that it seemed as if the Sport's life was greatly endangered.

Whiz! flew the deadly missile through the air—to be cleverly caught by the fair hand of the blonde Sport, when within two inches of his heart!

This act elicited another yell of surprise from the crowd, while the major stood upon the ground, fairly white with rage.

Glad was he that he had not been crushed by the falling horse; but his defeat was humiliating all the same, and he had lost a valuable animal in the bargain.

Clear it was, too, that the people were beginning to side with the cool Sport, for the cheers seemed to indicate something of the extent of their good feeling toward him.

"Are you satisfied, major?" Jo Dewolf asked, as the would-be sheriff stood glaring around. "Hew ye got yer fill?"

"Yes, I am satisfied for the present, I guess," was the savage reply. "I'll settle with this rascal some other time."

"Better do it now," Idaho Kit chuckled. "No time like the present, you know—never put off til to-morrer, what you kin do ter-day."

"Curse you! Will you mind your own business, girl?"

"Not ef ther court knows herself—not fer a poor, miserable galoot like you. Take my advice, major, and go steep your brains in benzene. I have heard it is an excellent remedy for opening the pores of the skull, and restoring the brain to a state of activity."

The major replied only by a black scowl, and turning on his heel, he strode away down the street.

Gilt-edged Dick then spoke to his horse, and galloped away to the Tontine Hotel, where he dismounted, and his horse was taken in charge by a hostler, while he entered the restaurant,

accompanied by the little girl who called him papa.

The Tontine restaurant was the only establishment of its kind, conducted on first class principles, in the mountain metropolis of Leadville.

Its managers were a pair of enterprising, wide-awake gentlemen who looked well to the accommodation of their patrons, and were capable of enforcing order, having had long experience in the matter of restaurant keeping; so that what with the assistant supervision of "Colonel" Jacob Schwartz, their place was ever crowded with all classes of humanity of the sterner sex, but no row ever occurred to mar the good repute of the house.

Miners gathered here to smoke and chat over their work; speculators were ever present, working up their plans; gamblers, sharpers and ruffians hung out here to "spot" their victims, although they were careful not to attempt any games within the Tontine's walls.

A special reserve of officers always were on the watch for these gentlemen who lived by villainy; ready were they to "bounce" them at the least provocation. Therefore the aforesaid gentlemen kept order.

On the evening after the street scene just recorded, the lounging room of the Tontine was crowded as usual, and the sounds of human voices made a hum that was monotonous. No loud talking was there—all seemed to converse in an undertone, as if secrets were being exchanged and dark plans hatched. An aged party, well-dressed, with long white hair and full beard, sauntered about among the crowd, apparently without object more than to familiarize himself with the scene and the acting figures thereof—a man with a hump upon his back, painful to behold, and a pair of green goggles fitted closely to his eyes. He walked with a cane, and limped perceptibly. Evidently his best days were over and he was fast nearing the grave.

For an hour he mingled with the crowd, and then, seeming to be laboring from fatigue, he took possession of a stall, that had been vacated, and proceeded to load and light a capacious but handsomely wrought meerschaum pipe.

He had not been seated more than ten minutes, when a man paused before the door of the stall; then, with a nod of recognition, entered and became seated, as if the meeting were not merely by chance.

A tall brawny individual, with long, bristling, black beard, and an ugly look about his eyes, which were of the same hue as the hair—a man clad in greasy buckskin breeches and jacket, stoga boots, and slouch hat—such was the new-comer.

"I thought you'd given me the slip," he said with a brutal chuckle, as he drew a flask of liquor from an inner pocket, and set it upon the table. "Drink sum o' thet pizen, an' et'll clear yer windpipe out."

"No, I thank you," the old man replied, shaking his head. "When I drink at all, I want to get dead drunk, which is not practicable, now. Eh?"

"Not by a hanged sight, ef you've got any news. What have you got to tell?"

"Lots," the other replied. "Oliver Stapleton, the financier, has a daughter, you know? Well, she is going to join him, here."

"Ah! Has been off to school, eh?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Well, what else?"

"A new Sport has come to town, and licked Major Dudley Doud, the first thing. He carries a little girl with him, and calls himself Gilt-Edged Dick."

"Indeed!" the black-whiskered man muttered. If he was deeply interested in this information, he did not betray the fact in his looks.

"Yes," the old man continued. "The Sport unhorsed the major as easy as rollin' off a log. He took the part o' thet gal, Idaho Kit, who be the sassiest, and most independent little piece in the town. I'd as lieve feed an elephant a cud of tobacco as to tread on her toes. I reckon ther result would be about equal."

The other smiled.

"She's a hard little cayuss ter manage, that's true," he said, with a chuckle. "Did she take a shine to Gilt-Edged Dick?"

"I reckon so. She looked all the time as if his style jest suited her."

"I reckoned that would be the case. Curse the fellow, why did he come here, just now? I don't want to kick up an open war with him, but I see no alternative. I'd as soon have a bloodhound get after me, as he. When is this Stapleton gal expected to arrive?"

"To-morrow, on the evening stage, I believe. She comes in by the way of the Webster and Fairplay stages."

"Very well. Keep your eyes around you on the outlook for developments, and you will see me again, probably when you least expect me."

And with these directions the man of the black whiskers, arose and left the stall, and quitted the restaurant.

The white-whiskered individual with the green goggles also soon left the Tontine, and hied himself to the notorious gambling den known as the Bonanza saloon.

This was kept by one Jacob Sleeper, a few hundred yards up Chestnut street, and was so low and ill-looking a building as to impress the idea upon an observer that it was one of the poorest dens of its class.

Yet such was not the case.

The interior was neat and clean, and supplied with a well-stocked bar and other fixtures, and filled with men whose pleasure it was to risk their money and oftentimes their lives upon games of chance.

The patrons comprised every type of character to be found in Leadville, from the most aristocratic citizen to the veriest wretch.

On every hand games of all kinds of chance went on; men ventured and lost every cent they possessed in the world, while others won, of course; men grew desperate and sought consolation in the flowing bowl; swindlers and sharps fleeced the unwary at every turn; quarrels were of frequent occurrence, wherein revolvers, knives or glasses and long-necked bottles took active parts.

Such was the scene; enlivened with bacchanalian songs, and the hilarious laughter of the victorious or the drunken.

The old man with the green goggles entered the saloon, and gazed around him with the air of one who was taking a mental inventory of the assembled crowd.

He then limped forward to the bar, and ordered a bottle of ale, which he soon finished with greatest apparent relish.

All eyes were occasionally centered upon him, but he seemed to pay no attention to the fact, but during a temporary lull in the hum of voices, to the surprise of all he was seen to mount one of the tables as if about to deliver a speech.

Instant attention was given him. Ready were these Leadville-ites to hear and learn, if thereby any pecuniary or adventuresome advantage could be gained.

Straight upon the table stood the old man, and gazed around him; then in clear distinct tones he cried:

"Behold you in me, all assembled pilgrims, John Smith, the greatest card sharp in the West, and the man who is willing to wager ten thousand dollars against ten thousand dollars on a square game of poker, with any similar fellow mortal present. Where is he now?—Let him step forward!"

CHAPTER IV.

ANOTHER OF LEADVILLE'S STREET SCENES.

ABOUT this same hour, when John Smith dashed the crowd of the Bonanza saloon, another crowd, similar in its types of character, was assembled in the main thoroughfare of the town, and a scene was presented, peculiar to those rough wild mining towns of the Far West, where men adhere to no style except the very roughest—who, as a rule, dig out their money in carbonates or gold, and spend it for whisky at night.

In the center of Chestnut street stood a wagon to which was attached a horse, and in each corner of what is familiarly known as "the democrat" were fixed two standards, bearing a lamp apiece, and these were lighted.

Standing upright in the wagon, with the seat in front of her as a counter, was the somewhat eccentric character whom we have seen—Idaho Kit, the Girl Sport.

She it was, and no mistake.

In the wagon, or rather upon the improvised counter, were three or four boxes a couple of feet square in size. Two of these contained an ill-assorted lot of writing paper, envelopes, pen-holders, pencils and miscellaneous articles of stationery and brass jewelry.

The third box contained full a half bushel of silver coins—genuine ones, too, ranging in size and value from quarters to silver dollars.

Also upon the seat lay a large package of extra-sized yellow envelopes, such as are used mostly to seal up contracts and official papers.

This was one of the scenes.

Further down the street a horrible brass band was playing in front of a variety theater, in another place an auctioneer was crying his

wares in ear-splitting tones; everywhere was confusion and bustle and jostle such as might be seen upon Broadway, only of a different phase of noises and people.

Around the stand of the Girl Sport the crowd grew thickest, for many had a curiosity to know what kind of a game she was up to.

Clad with scrupulous care was she in her semi-male suit, and looking as royally pretty as ever before, under the light of the lamp together with the effulgence of the full moon.

Restless grew her audience—so restless, that she at last ceased the arrangement of her wares, and began to look around.

After a searching scrutiny of those assembled, she began:

"Feller-citizens: It becomes me as the proprietor of this concern to git up here and tell you what I am going to do—how I am going to fleece you right out of your ducats. You behold in me a gal o' the period—good-looking, virtuous, cheeky, and likewise, to some extent, tonguey. Taken in a literal sense, I'm a hard crowd. That I am the biggest cheat, fraud and humbug abroad all of you will admit when I'm done with you. I warn you all of this in the send-off. Don't go and expect to git rich out of me, for you will surely fail—you will get beat so sure's my handle is Idaho Kit. That's my business—to swindle and gouge you right before your eyes, and give you leave to find out how I do it. No underhand work about this now—it is a simple scheme of artistic roguery, as plain as the nose on yer face, an' ef you'll stand up hyar and let me pick the ducats right away from you because I'm pretty, why, you mustn't grumble when you find you've got smashed. That never was a woman who warn't a tempter, an' the greater fraud she is, the more attractive, generally speaking. And it's just so with me.

"What do you open-mouthed, grinning pilgrims know about me? How do you know but what I've spent the best part of my time in prison, or that I am not connected with the worst gang of thieves in seven counties? Why,

of course you don't know nothing about me—noting at all. You've seen me a few times and heerd me called Idaho Kit, an' here you are ready ter lay down for me yer very lives. But I don't want 'em; all I want's yer money, and have it I'm going to; and the wisest man in the crowd is he who waltzes up and lays down his every ducat before me, for he will be relieved

of the curiosity of wanting to invest, by the knowledge that he hasn't a red cent; and he can laugh in his sleeve because he was not swindled.

"Now, then, rub your eyes, open them wide, and watch the sharpest you know, and see how I'm going to cheat you. See! I take up one of

these large envelopes, open it wide in the mouth

—like a Dutchman when he is getting ready to drink his lager—and hold it at nearly arm's length in my left hand. Then with my right hand I reach into my box and find one quire of writing paper, one quire of envelopes and a pen-holder, all of which I drop into the larger envelope, as you see.

"Then I follow it with a half-dozen lead pencils warranted to be Professor Faber's best; then comes a penknife to clean the dirt from under your finger-nails, a genuine goose-quill tooth-pick, worth a ten-dollar note—to any goose; here's a handsome sixteen karat ring, recommended to be genuine brass: now we have some pens, likewise a few pins, a shirt button—you may've lost one, you know—ha!

here is a brand new genuine one-dollar note, I find cruising around in my museum, and I'll chuck that in, in the bargain. Now then, who'll give me twenty—ay, fifteen, ten or five dollars for the lot—five dollars for the lot. Where's the pilgrim that wants to throw away five dollars in exchange for fifty dollars' worth of merchandise, more or less. There is none? Well,

I might have known better, that I couldn't cheat such an intelligent audience—the veriest set of gaup-heads I ever see'd in my life. Cheat you? Waal, I opine a pilgrim will hav to get up in the morning. But to make the game

hilarious, I'll see you my festive galoots, and go you some better on the venture. Only don't be deceived in regard to the worth of the articles in that envelope.

"With the exception of the dollar bill, the rest of the stuff cost me about ten cents, and before I get through with you, I'm going to make you pay five of Uncle Sam's dollars for it, and be glad to get more. Yes, that's jest my little game. Now see here—glue your optics upon me. Here in this box are silver coins, quarters, halves, and dollars. Now watch me sharp, and see that I don't cheat you before your eyes, for

I'm a hard citizen, and don't you forget it. Now, here I select out a silver dollar, and toss it into the air, and down it comes into the envelope—you all saw it, didn't you? Oh! of course you did. Well, that's one dollar; here goes another—that's two; then follows still another making three. But I ain't no hog—here goes four quarters in succession—that makes four: two fifties you see going in, now, making five. Pshaw! don't get tired of waiting, pilgrims, for I ain't done, yet; four more dollar will I toss up for your edification—one, two, three, four. There—five and four makes nine and the one dollar bill in the package makes ten dollars. Now, I will seal up this package there! now is there any galoot in the audience with more money than brains, who will step and give me five dollars for the lot? Where's the man? Let him step forward and show himself. Cheat? Of course it's a cheat. Why didn't you see me toss the coins into the pad? Come; does any one want the lot?"

There was hesitation in the crowd. Amazement were they—suspicious, too. To be sure they were confident that they had seen every go into the envelope; yet the mystery of Girl Sharp's giving away ten dollars for it was something passing strange. Either she was a lunatic, or else there was some game under all beyond their comprehension.

Excited were they to a great pitch, yet too suspicious to nibble at the offered bait.

Idaho Kit saw this, with a chuckle, and after lighting a cigarette, she resumed:

"Well, I'll be hanged if this ain't a curious world. An old snoozer here to my right believes it's a bona fide offer, an' then I'm giving away my cash to influence votes fer next election when I'm to run fer sheriff on ther Woman's Suffrage ticket. Ha! ha! that man no doubt means well, but is a bigger fool than I should be, were I to part with my cash so freely. Of course I can't blame you for not buying the package, pilgrims. You didn't want to pay five dollars for ten cents' worth of trash, and you are wise. To show you how badly you would have been cheated had you invested, I will simply turn the contents out in a little pasteboard tray I have here, and let you see."

This she did, and held the tray in such a position that they could view the contents. Then there arose upon the lips of the spectators exclamations of surprise, for there were the coins among the other articles.

"Say, 'thar' I'll give you five dollars for that pan, now!" Horrible Hank, the mule-driver announced, stepping forward.

"Yes, you will, in a pig's eye," Idaho Kit replied, with a grim laugh. "I'm goin' to put back the hull business in the envelope, just as I did before, and before I get through with you, you will willingly admit that I am the king or rather the queen of frauds."

And according to her word the girl sharper did as she promised, restoring first the paper and other articles to a fresh envelope, and then tossing up the coins and causing them to fall into the same receptacle.

She then sealed the envelope and stood gazing around her with a strange cynical smile which none could interpret.

"Who grabs the Bonanza this time, for five dollars, with the warning that they are getting unmercifully fleeced—where's the man?"

"Gimme ther pot!" cried Horrible Hank, excitedly as he forked up a five-dollar note. "I'll run ther risk o' losin', an'll bet I'm a ahead."

"I'll bet you a hundred dollars you ain't!" Idaho Kit cried, as she received the note. "Will you bet?"

"Cuss ye, no. Ef I'm beat I kin lose et. I reckon. Give me the package."

The order was obeyed, and tearing it open the mule-driver emptied the contents into his hat. And there among the other articles were the identical coins, or ten dollars in all.

A murmur of excited amazement ran through the crowd.

This was beyond their comprehension.

"There, you see you've got no sand at all the Sport said, laughing. "If you'd have it with me you'd have won."

"Durn my foolish pelt, yes," the mule-driver muttered, somewhat crestfallen. "I'm five ahead, though."

"Yes, that means one more drunk on the market, I suppose," Idaho replied, grimly. "Now, pilgrims, I'm going to do less talkin' and more work. I'm going to fill one hundred envelopes inside of ten minutes."

I want you all to watch lest I should ci... by neglecting to put in the coins, for I... repeatedly told you I'm up to all such fraude...

Gilt-Edged Dick.

lent tricks. When I get the requisite number of packages done, I shall sell them off for five dollars apiece; so those who want to invest must have their V's ready!"

Then to work she went with nimble fingers, first filling the envelopes with her stock in trade, and then tossing the coins into the air so that they seemed to descend into the same receptacle.

Eagerly the crowd watched for some sign that would expose a cheat, but none could they see. Evidently this eccentric girl was doing just as she had done before—was parting with her money on the receipt of less than half its value. It was strange, but what their eyes had beheld they must credit, even though it was something miraculous.

As a people they became greatly excited, and by the time Idaho Kit had filled her hundred packages, every man in the crowd held a five-dollar note in his upraised fists, ready to claim one of the bonanza "pans" of which Idaho Kit was the dispenser.

"Ef Horrible Hank can double his ducats, so ken we," said one pilgrim; and the crowd universally agreed with him.

"Now, then," Idaho said, pushing back her hat, and wiping the perspiration from her brow—"now, then, I intend to work just five minutes in selling out these packages, after which I shall adjourn the sale. Ready, now; who's the first lucky pilgrim as wants me to swindle him? Let him step up and sacrifice his V, like a man, and learn a lesson!"

While the crowd seemed momentarily to draw back and hesitate, one pilgrim had the courage to reach up his last five-dollar note, and receive in payment therefor one of the sealed packages.

Eagerly did the crowd watch him open the package, and when he poured out ten silver dollars into his hand, they no longer doubted, but rushed forward, frantic with excitement, to claim a piece of this wonderful bonanza gift.

As fast as her hands could fly did Idaho Kit receive the bills and hand out the packages, warning the eager purchasers with every breath that they were getting beat.

But believe this they evidently could not, after what they had seen, and accordingly they tendered their greenbacks and received the envelopes until every one was sold.

Then, came a general opening and a general discovery, which elicited yells of surprise and indignation.

Of all the packages not one contained a silver piece, out of the whole batch of a hundred, except the one that had started the sale. Only a few old coppers supplied the place of what should have been coins.

True to her word Idaho Kit had swindled them; and now she sat comfortably perched upon the seat of her wagon, as cool as the reputed frigidity of the much abused cucumber.

"I told you so," she nodded, with a reckless laugh, as the crowd turned toward her with dark looks. "I give ye all fair warnin' that I was a-goin' to peal you, and I've done it to the tune of some four hundred and eighty dollars in my pocket. Much obliged! Of course I am. You thought your eyes were smarter than my hands, and you got terribly sucked in, my pilgrims. Go you home, my flock of disconsolates, and remember that when an ordinary galoot gets ahead of Idaho Kit, he's got to set his alarm clock fer two, A. M. an' get up with his eyes open."

CHAPTER V.

THE WOMAN AT THE CABIN.

ONE of the component parts of Leadville is Stray Horse Gulch, with its host of tributary cabins, "turnpike" road, and its toll-gates.

Further on as it runs northward, it becomes deeper and more gloomy—narrow and rocky and tortuous, while the light of the day rarely penetrates to its rough pebbly bottom, along which courses for a distance an infant stream.

From the outskirts of the town all the way thither are strung occasional cabins or shanties, tenanted by such people as had squatted here in preference to going into town and paying exorbitant rents.

In one of these cabins a woman lay upon a bed, composed of a straw mattress and a blanket—lay there in evident great pain and suffering, for her features were contorted, and her eyes wild and glaring.

By the light of a candle that burned dimly upon the table—the only furniture in the room except the bed—one could see that she had once been as fair as women ever are, in the heyday of their ripening bloom, but long years had passed over her head, since then, and left

indelible traces of suffering and trouble in the painful furrows and wrinkles upon the face.

She was evidently five and forty years of age.

The bed was a most miserable affair; there was no fire—no stove in the room; the house was bare and desolate enough.

"Isaac!" the woman called, suddenly sitting bolt upright in bed, and glaring fiercely around. "Isaac!"

"Yes'm!" came the response, and out from under the table crawled a great strapping fellow, clad in rags and as filthy as could be.

He was between the age of youth and manhood, evidently, although fully developed and as strong as a grizzly. But there was a strange vacant stare in his eyes, and a stranger, silly grin upon his features, which pronounced him to be a fool.

He was now smoking the stub of a clay pipe.

"Ah! you Ike!" the invalid cried, sharply, "what have you been doing?"

There was no reply from the fellow except by "finger" talk.

"Oh! been layin' on the floor, eh?" the woman snapped, angrily, "when I'm dying here for want of attendance. Give me that black bottle on the table."

The idiot obeyed, and stood watching the sick woman gulp down the contents, enviously.

"Oh! you can't have none, Isaac!" she said, interpreting his glance.

"I've drained the bottle of every drop. Now, tell me again, when he said he would come?"

"After dark," the idiot replied, by his finger telegraph.

"It's after dark, now—long after dark," the woman fretted. "Why don't he come, if he intends to come at all? What time is it, boy?"

"Midnight, nearly," the mute replied, as before.

"Curse him! Perhaps he does not intend to come? Maybe he dare not. You Ike get into a corner and lay there. I hear his footsteps, now. If you are asked any questions, remember you are deaf, dumb and a fool."

The youth seemed to fear this strange woman, for he shrunk away to one side of the cabin, and stretched himself upon the floor like some great mastiff.

A few moments thereafter a horse was heard approaching; a man dismounted and entered the cabin with the air of one in search of something.

At sight of the woman he stopped.

Such a customer was he in appearance as might have been expected to emerge from the black depths of the night without, in the gloomy Stray Horse Gulch.

A thin, wiry man, attired in a suit of black broadcloth which had seen its best days, the trowsers being tucked in the legs of a pair of knee boots, a wide-brim hat slouched over his forehead, and the remainder of his face hidden behind a mask.

A "scaly" looking man to meet in a dark place was he, for his belt contained a small-sized arsenal, and a cocked revolver was held in his hand.

This he restored to his belt, now, however, and approached the bedside in a stealthy fashion, as if he were afraid of the woman upon the mattress.

"Marie, is this indeed you?" he asked, in a husky voice. "I thought you were dead—long ago."

"And hoped so, no doubt; but you see I am not!" the invalid replied. "I have been huntin' after you, from town to town for fifteen long, weary years, and at last recognized you in the streets of Leadville. If I had not been one of the merciful, I should have shot you down in your tracks, but I preferred to track you to your lair. I then returned here and penned the note which brought you here."

The man was silent for a few moments. Then he spoke:

"What do you want of me, woman? I am nothing to you or you to me. We parted enemies; the hand of time has smoothed over the graves of all early loves, hopes and ambitions: why recall the past, or—"

"Stop!" she cried. "Well may you tremble to hear the past recalled. You deserted me, and left me with the fool, while you took my other child. Behold your son, lying yonder in the corner. He is the image of you, no doubt, were you unmasked. He is deaf, dumb, and an idiot, and you are his father. Are you not proud of him?"

"Hush! for God's sake!" the man gasped nervously, "or you will betray me to him, and forever ruin my prospects."

"Ha! ha! what care I, do you suppose,

whether your prospects are blighted, or not? You are nothing to me, more than the bare word husband implies. I am dying, and possibly shall not live the night out."

"I am sorry for you," the man in the mask replied—"truly sorry." I am aware that I wronged you by desertion, but you had such an irascible temper that I could not stand it."

"You lie, you wretch, I had no temper at all, and that's where you took advantage of me. You married me for my money, and after you had squandered all you could get hold of, you ended the matter by deserting me."

"Don't be hard on me, Marie. If I was at fault then, I am willing to do what is right, now," the man said, buttoning up his coat, as if to depart.

"Oh! you are, eh?" the woman cried, with a sneer. "You are willing to remove me and Ike to your home, and introduce us into society, and let us have access to your money pots? Oh! yes; you're such a dear, generous soul, I know you'll do all this and even more!"

There was a ring of righteous contempt in the woman's speech, that caused the man to bite his lips beneath his mask, until the blood came.

"Really I could not do this, Marie. You are not able to be moved, and were you, you would feel ill at ease in my elegant mansion. You had best remain here, and keep the boy here, and I will send you such necessaries as will make you comfortable—"

"Not a thing, sir—not a thing! Don't you dare to," the woman cried, excitedly. "All I want of you is a thousand dollars to give to Ike, so that he will not be penniless, after I am dead."

"A thousand dollars, woman? Impossible! I have no such amount to give away, nor could I if I had. You must be mad to think of such a thing. The boy has no claim upon me."

"Ah! but you'll discover quite to the contrary, curse you! I have brought the idiot up to hate you more than the cougar hates the hunter. I have taught him a fearful oath of vengeance upon you, and he says it as a prayer, night and morning. At times he is rational; then it is that you have cause to fear him, for it is then when he remembers the wrong you have done him—knows how, when he was a babe, you struck him a blow from which he never recovered. Now he is a fool; were I to signal to him that you were his father it would not arouse his interest. But never fear; he will find you, when you are off your guard, and avenge both our wrongs."

"I'll see that he does no harm," the man replied, calmly. "Good-by, Marie, for I am off. I wish you a pleasant journey to the other land. You'll no doubt see me there in a few years, if nothing happens!"

And then, with a cruel laugh, the man left the house, mounted his horse and galloped furiously away toward Leadville.

As he quitted the cabin, the idiot rose upon his elbow and stared after him, as if taking a mental inventory of his appearance.

He then dropped back and went to sleep.

The announcement of John Smith in the Bonanza saloon of course created a sensation.

Any pilgrim who had confidence enough in his ability to risk ten thousand dollars on a game of cards was indeed a distinguished individual in the eyes of these feverish Leadvillians.

Cool as the much-abused cucumber is reputed to be was the gray-haired old man, as he stood upon the table and surveyed his audience, seeking a man who had an amount of cheek and ducats equal to his own.

But not one was there who seemed to possess the requisite "sand" until the door opened and in sauntered the Sport. Gilt-Edged Dick, the cool blonde individual whose reputation had already spread over the town since his encounter with Major Doud.

"Ah! there's the style of pilgrim who is not afraid to win a few or risk a few. I tell you, John Smith cried, pointing to the Sport. "He's got sand, he has, and don't you ferrit it. Ten thousand dollars, now, ag'in ten thousand, that I can beat any man in the room at a square game of poker. Try me a whirl, Sport?"

"I reckon," Gilt-Edged Dick replied, laconically. "Anything to make it interesting. Ten thousand dollars, did you say, sir?"

"Ten thousand, yes, my lord," the venerable John Smith assured, dropping from the table into the chair with alacrity. "I believe in having a good stiff 'pan' when playing for profit."

"Exactly," the Sport replied, calmly, and drawing a huge wallet from his pocket, he laid twenty bills down upon the table, each bill to

Gilt-Edged Dick

ing of the denomination of half a thousand dollars. "The more the merrier, to the man who wins. Plank, and produce, sir."

John Smith obeyed readily.

He planked his stake, and produced a brand new pack of cards, which were cut, shuffled and dealt in a scientific manner, which betrayed that this descendant of the great Smith family was an adept in the art of manipulating the pasteboards.

The table where the two sat was surrounded by a crowd of men eager to see which would win. Every confidence had they in the gilt-edged gentleman, yet this man Smith exhibited so many of the infallible signs of being a professional gamester that part of the public opinion sided for him.

This difference in opinion as to the luck of the players led to the consummation of large bets on every hand between men of capital.

The first game was begun, and played through and John Smith won!

Won fairly, as the Sport admitted. Far ahead had the gambler seen, and planked his cards in the right shape, every time.

"I believe that gives me the 'pan,' pardner," he said, coolly, raking in the pile. "Do you want another twist?"

"Of course, I have a right to call for revenge," Gilt-Edged Dick replied, as coolly as if his loss had only been ten cents. "I shall win this time, and quit."

The crowd waited expectantly.

The cards were shuffled.

The game was played.

And Gilt-Edged Dick won.

"Good! I am glad of it," John Smith said, counting out twenty-five-hundred-dollar bills from his purse, and handing them to the Sport. "Your luck will give you confidence to play with me again, some other time."

And then bowing, he betook himself from the saloon, to be followed, later, by the Sport, who strode toward the Tontine for his supper, which he had not yet partaken of.

On the steps he met Idaho Kit.

"Hold up!" she saluted, advancing. "I've got a whisper for you."

"Well, let's have it," was the reply, and a smile hovered beneath the Sport's blonde mustache.

Evidently he admired this Girl Sport. She was just his own type.

"Well, here's what it is," Kit said, in a mysterious manner. "I reckon that that galoot, Major Doud, is a-goin' ter try an' drive you from the town. I jest see'd his majorship a-talkin' wi' Horrible Hank Hopkins, w'at is in their line o' business known as grave-fillin'."

"And you think they were conversing about me, eh?" the Sport asked.

"I reckon so."

"And why?"

"Oh! because, that major's a malicious devil, an' bein' you've wounded his local pride, he don't love you, better than some whole families."

"You think not?"

"You bet! On account o' yer bein' sech a handsome sort o' galoot, I tuk pains to inquire around, an' I found as how the major has sed he'd run you out of the town, either by force or by disgrace—an' I reckon he'll keep his word."

"A savage dispositioned cuss, this major, then?" Gilt-Edged Dick observed, a peculiar expression hovering about his firm mouth.

"Oh! yes—a regular spitz poodle. Tain't the harm he'll do a person in front of his face, but behind one's back."

"Well, let him go ahead. I'll think of what you have said."

"Correct! Look out for a pilgrim they call Horrible Hank. An' beware, for I reckon they mean harm to your little gal."

A dark look gathered about the Sport's forehead at this juncture.

"They'd better look out how they make attempts on her," he replied, sternly.

"Your daughter I take it?" Idaho Kit queried, by way of keeping up the conversation. For plain it was that she was enamored of the Sport.

"Exactly, my daughter," was the reply.

"Widower, then, eh?" came next.

"To this I'd rather not answer," he said, smiling. "Good-night to you."

And bowing pleasantly this thoroughbred man of the world turned, and sauntered into the restaurant.

Idaho Kit gazed after him a moment, and then sauntered along up the street, toward the polls, where a crowd was anxiously awaiting the returns of the election.

"Was that a cut direct, or a polite invite-

tion to mind my own business?" she muttered. "I reckon it was the latter. He's got a secret."

As the Sport entered the restaurant a man pushed by him and came out; then, as if involuntarily, the two men turned around and gazed at each other through the open door!

CHAPTER VI.

CAPTAIN CARTER STOPS THE STAGE.

EVIDENT it was that the two men had met before, or thought they had, for they both turned as if by mutual recognition, and stood gazing at each other in a manner that indicated that neither was highly pleased.

The man who had passed the Sport, and emerged into the street, was known in Leadville circles as Mr. Oliver Stapleton.

He was a tall, thin individual, with haughty bearing; a face was his that, bereft of beard of any style, was of a grayish pallor which was not pleasant to see when associated with heavy wrinkles and furrows, and the habitual cold expression of the steel-gray eyes.

Clad in elegantly cut broadcloth was the king *financiere*, as he was known, with a soft undandified hat upon his head, and a gold-headed cane in his hand.

And he stood and gazed coolly at the Sport and the Sport returned the gaze with interest, until the crowd surged between them in passing in and out of the door. Then Gilt-Edge continued on into the lounging room of the Tontine, while Oliver Stapleton, Esq., continued along up the street, in a perplexity of thought.

"I cannot be mistaken!" he muttered, shutting his teeth tightly together.

While Dick said nothing, whatever were his thoughts. Close-mouthed was he with all his secrets.

After smoking a cigar in the lounging room, he ordered his horse, and was seen, later, galloping out of the town. Major Dudley Doud saw him too, as with the ruffian, Horrible Hank, he stood before a saloon in the neighborhood of the Theater Comique.

"He rides like as if he war a fust-class road-agent," the mule-driver said, screwing his face into a grin. "You're a fine horseman, major, but no match for him."

"Curse him," Dudley Doud gritted. "He'll never get the best of me again. But your words have armed me, Hopkins—armed me with weapons of power. We can charge this gilt-edged devil with being Jabez Carter the road-agent, and we're two to one ag'in' him. If we make the thing work, he's elected to favor the Leadvillains with a tight-rope performance. Indeed, I candidly believe that he is the road-agent."

"So do I," the mule-driver declared, emphatically, "but you jest leave it to me, and I'll intercept that cuss, and drap him so quick as evyer a musketeer sed his prayers. I will, you bet—sure's my name is Hank Hopkins, with the prefix of Horrible."

The night following was a beautiful one, with starlit heavens, and the great full moon soaring through the clear sky, and casting her mellow radiance down among the mountains and gulches.

Through one of these gulches, upon either side of which were mighty walls of mountain rock, studded by tall rakish pines, that looked spectral, phantom-like in the moonlight, tore the incoming Leadville stage from Webster, the horses responding to the crack of Jehu's whip, with snorts and leaps, that rocked and jolted the vehicle terribly.

Billy McGee was the driver of this stage, and an expert lineman, too, but afflicted with too great a gift of gab for his own good, said those who knew him.

"Oh! wurra me darlint Mary,
A sister's name waz Sarah,
Her fayther kipt a ferr,
An' she married Mike McCann!"

sung Billy, right merrily, as he cracked his long-lashed whip, and "tickled" the ear of the foremost off-horse of his six in hand. "Ah! bad luck to me same self! I ought to be rich, indade, instead av drivin' stage ivery day."

"You had, eh?" asked the black-whiskered stranger, in the *serape* and slouch hat, who sat beside Billy upon the box. "What chance have you ever had to make a fortune?"

"Och! a divil of a question ye ask, now, yer honor. Shure didn't I work five years in New York at carryin' the hod, an' it waz three dollars a day I saved and put in me empty stockin'. But, bad 'cess to me, thin along cum tha little darlant of a wifder wid her blarney, an' she whispered luv inter me ear, an' hugged me—be-dad, an' slipped her hand into the pocket av me

coat an' stole every rid cent I had. An' didn't I s'arch the hull city over 'thout findin' hide or hair av her?"

"Served you right. No business to let women pull wool over your eyes," the man with the black whiskers said.

"Divil a bit av wool was thar about it, sur-
yer honor. She robbed me whin my eyes were
open, entirely."

"So much the bigger fool, you. By the way—
who have you for passengers, to-night?"

Gradually the man was approaching a point in the conversation more interesting to him.

"Who have I aboard, is it?" Billy replied, with an extra flourish of his long whip, surnamed the "rib-tickler."

"Ah! it's a fine crowd I carry—as fine a crowd as ever wore a sprig av a shillelah over his pate, after a St. Patrick day's parade. That's them they call Professor Peabody, w'at is a rare blood of a gentleman; thin that's Mike Malley and Dennis McCarty, jist arrived over from the ould sod; thin there's a preacher, and a trapper, and a leddy, your honor."

"Ah! a lady, eh?" the stranger said, elevatin' his shaggy eyebrows. "Young and handsome, I dare say?"

"Yis, sur, as pritty as a pictur', but as cold as a slice av iceberg."

"Going to Leadville?"

"Yis, sur; mebbe yez might know her, sur—
Mr. Stapleton's daughter."

"No, I am not personally acquainted with the family," the stranger replied, and then relapsed into silence.

Not so with Billy.

In a voice not wholly unmusical, he sung snatches of popular Irish songs, and had time to crack his whip, and curse the horses, roundly in the intervals.

Away through the gloomy, rugged gulch-road sped the stage, the horses adhering to a stiff trot, no matter how rough the trail might be in certain places.

Woe be to those passengers on the inside who were of nervous temperament, for now the stage tore along over rocks and through ruts, sometimes threatening to capsize, when balanced, as it frequently was, on two wheels.

Not a whit cared Billy McGann for the comfort of his passengers, so long as he harvested a fair crop of their ducats in payment for the ride. And these he always wisely demanded in advance, as it was uncertain if the passengers would have a cent to their names when they got to the end of their route, because of the frequent invitations of road-agents to give up their wealth.

For road-agents there were—polite, deft-fingered gents of the trail, who rarely failed to stop the stages, and demand whatever valuables might be aboard.

Billy knew them by heart—knew them in all their phases of character, and likewise knew that it was advisable for him to stop the stages at their demand, rather than to get a solid shot of lead somewhere in his system.

Experience had taught him this wisdom, and therefore when the black-whiskered stranger in the *serape* touched him firmly upon the shoulder, and said "halt!" Billy had reason to believe "business was brewing."

"Halt!" the stranger repeated a second time, and in a stern voice, while Billy felt the cold muzzle of a revolver against his cheek, and accordingly yanked the snorting animals back upon their haunches.

Then out from the chaparral skirting the road came a score of men in masks and promptly surrounded the stage, the black-whiskered stranger dismounting from the box and opening the door.

"Ladies and gentlemen, your money and other valuables," he said, calmly. "Be lively about handing them over, for my men are impatient to have a row, and only a speedy delivery of your ducats can prevent it, and also save you from danger!"

There were several passengers who had mind to refuse, but the sight of the road-agent's revolver caused them to change their mind and fork over their cash in a lively manner.

A young lady, deeply veiled, sat in one corner, but did not offer to "pan out," to use vernacular of the mines. Jabez Carter, the road-agent, noticed this fact, and addressed her promptly:

"Your purse and jewels, Miss Stapleton, if you please!" he said. "Sorry to bother you, but I know you are liberal-minded and ever willing to devote your ducats to charitable purposes, and therefore I draw upon you."

Miss Stapleton threw back her veil and gazed at the road-agent keenly.

Gilt-Edged Dick.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"I am Jabez Carter, at your service, miss-road-agent and professional pickpocket!" the man replied. "Come! will you favor me with a contribution?"

"I suppose I shall have to," was the reply, as the young woman dropped her veil and handed forth an elegant gold watch and a couple of rings, together with a small purse. "But I will set the Vigilantes after you, and you shall give back all your spoils!"

"Ha! ha! my dear girl, you talk heroically, but you little know what you are talking about. Women are all fools nowadays. Drive on, Irish—drive on!"

Billy McGee did not need a second invitation, for he promptly cracked his whip over the horses' heads, and away rolled the stage again through the moonlit night.

While Jabez Carter and his outlaws rode back into their retreat richly laden with the spoils of their robbery.

The chief led in advance and seemed strangely sober and thoughtful.

The girl of the stage-coach had attracted him, but in what way it is not for us to know at present.

He was a strange man of stranger passions—utterly unreadable.

In the meantime the stage rolled on through the gloomy gulch and at last brought up in front of Leadville's Delmonico, the Tontine.

Mr. Oliver Stapleton was on the steps, and when he saw his daughter alight, he rushed forward and embraced her, albeit hundreds were standing around and witnessed the act.

"Come!" the financier said, after he had kissed her; "you must be tired; besides, I have news to communicate."

"News?" she echoed, as she took his arm, and they walked down the street together.

"Yes, news," the old man replied. "Who do you suppose is here in Leadville?"

"How should I know?" the daughter replied, languidly. "There appears a lawless lot of ruffians, judging from the adventure I had, to-night."

"The adventure?"

"Yes. The stage was stopped by road-agents, and the passengers robbed."

"The devil! and you—"

"Lost my purse, watch and jewelry."

"Outrageous! What gang was it?"

"I know not, except that one man's name was Jabez Carter."

"Hal! curse him. I know the villain. He is an old foe of mine. But, who do you suppose has turned up, right at a moment when he was least expected—when least wanted, I may add."

"I do not know. You remember I am a miserable poor guesser, papa."

"When you want to be," the financier snarled, crustily. "Well, the man is Richard—"

"What! Richard Webster?"

"Exactly! Richard Webster, or Gilt-Edged Dick as he now calls himself."

Miss Stapleton's eyes emitted a venomous sparkle. She was a tall, stately woman of two and twenty years, with a haughty carriage, and the air of one who was aware of every attractive point she possessed. Her features were purely Anglo-Saxon, but as purely white as marble; her eyes were dark, and her hair of the same hue. She was richly attired; and was an uncommon personage to be seen in the streets of the carbonite metropolis.

"What brought him here?" she demanded, lips compressed.

"I do not know," the financier replied. "He has come at any rate, and has already established his reputation, by taking the part of a female street vagabond, knocking down Major Dudley Doud, and afterward fighting a street duel with him. Since then I learn that he has won ten thousand dollars at cards, in a single game."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, and report has it that he was up looking at the Vulture mine, this afternoon, with the view of purchasing it himself."

"He must have become more flush of stamps of late than he was when—when—"

"When you made a fool of yourself," Oliver Stapleton finished, sourly. "He is evidently rich, now, and if you had waited—"

"Bah! I'd rather be excused," Miss Stapleton replied, with a sarcastic sneer. "Is the child with him?"

"Yes. She is a smart little thing—bright and pretty as a doll."

"I care not. Are we not most home? I am tired and sick of traveling, and prefer to rest before agitating this question any further."

"Yes—here is my hotel. Our rooms are upon the second floor, front, to the right of the hall. Shall I send you up some supper and wine?"

"A glass of sherry, if you please. I do not care for supper."

And then Miss Stapleton swept up the broad staircase, leaving her progenitor to order the wine.

Once in the elegantly appointed parlor of the financier's suite, she burst into a low, sarcastic laugh, which had in it the spice of venom.

"Richard Webster here in Leadville! Ha! ha! What a charming occurrence, to be sure, that we should meet again! And Dudley Doud is here, too—Dudley Doud, as evil-disposed a man as lives—yet I can twist him around my finger, when I choose."

"Then, there is poor, confiding papa, who, although he has been a graduate in villainy, in his day, is too confiding to live in this age. Little he dreams that his own daughter can be a greater villain than himself. Ah! Dick Webster, your divorced wife has come to Leadville—not to court your favor, but to renew the feud—to trample you beneath my feet and crush you. And there are many ways to do it—many ways you do not dream of, perhaps. One is through the doll-faced child, whom I hate as cordially as if she were some vagrant's brat, instead of being my own flesh and blood. I will not kill her—no, I could not do that, but through her I will wring Dick Webster's heart, until his very hair changes from gold to white. Gilt-Edged Dick, indeed! I wonder where he caught that name? Ha! ha! he will need to be gilt-edged, to turn aside my assault. Dudley Doud shall be my agent, too—for what would he not do for me? Poor, miserable fool! He adores the ground I walk upon—even calls me a beautiful—"

"Devil! exactly. A beautiful devil!" a cool voice exclaimed; and with a cool, mocking smile, the major stepped into the parlor and confronted Miss Stapleton.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TIGRESS AND TIGER UNITED.

YES, Dudley Doud it was, attired in the height of fashion, and looking exceedingly dandified. No man in Leadville pretended to wear finer clothes than the major when he was flush of wealth.

"Beautiful Devil!" he repeated, advancing into the parlor, where Miss Stapleton was standing. "Forgive me, my dear Louise, but I accidentally overheard your soliloquy, and thought I'd step in—and perhaps we could strike a bargain at once. I am desperately in need of funds, and you know a desperate man stops not at trifles."

"Don't, eh?" Miss Stapleton replied, pushing him a chair. "Well, as I have seldom had the pleasure of seeing men desperate, I cannot say. I am glad you have come, however. I want to test your old feelings for me—"

"Oh! my Louise, let me assure you that they are the same. The weakness for you has not faded, in the least, nor has any other woman supplanted you in my affections."

"I am glad. I am sure of you on my side, then."

"Against the Gilt-Edged Sport, yes. But tell me, what is the mystery between you and him, Louise?"

"There is no mystery," Miss Stapleton replied, laying aside her wraps, and becoming seated. "Richard Webster was once my husband, but procured a divorce from me. It is no secret—I care not if all the world shall know it."

"You then are the mother of the child?"

"I am; but I hate the child even as I hate the father."

"You do?"

"I do!"

"And it is your wish to strike the Sport a blow?"

"Ay! I shall strike him, and he shall find that it will be no baby blow. First, however, I intend to extort money from him, and you, Dudley Doud, must help me in all my plots and schemes, and shall share equally with me in the spoils."

"You swear to this?"

"I do—and more: After I am satisfied with my vengeance upon Gilt-Edged Dick, I will marry you, providing you can prove yourself as rich as I."

"It's a bargain. I will devote my entire efforts to your service, and to accruing a fortune, in order that I may claim thee, my Louise. For my only hope in life is merged in you, and I care not what stands in my way, I

will overcome the obstacle that I may claim you."

"You talk like a hero, Dudley Doud, and if you faithfully execute my commands, you shall receive a just reward. I want to torture Richard Webster in every way that I can that is excruciating to him. I want to rend his heart, first, and then kill him, afterward."

"Ah! yes, I see. You will kill the girl?"

"No! I want none of her innocent blood upon my hands—not I. I will have her abducted, and place her where she will be as securely hidden as is Charley Ross."

"And then extort money from the Gilt-Edged Sport?"

"Of course. He shall pay handsomely if he ever looks upon the face of the child again, once I get her in my power."

"Good! There are other ways to inflict torture, too," the major suggested, with an evil chuckle. "But, leave them to me. I've a grudge against the Sport myself, and if I do not make things hot for him, you may put me down as a failure. I will now bid you adieu, and when you want me I am most generally to be found around the Tontine restaurant."

"Very well; when I am ready to begin action, you will be apprised," Miss Stapleton said, bowing him out, in her cool, haughty way.

The major went back to the Tontine, took his nightly ration of brandy and then sought his lodgings for the night.

In the morning he was up with the sun, and met Horrible Hank in front of the United States.

The ruffianly mule-driver had been upon a nocturnal spree, and looked considerably the worse for it, one eye being bandaged, and a gash from his mouth to the left ear being covered with court-plaster. In no amiable mood was the giant, either, judging from the way in which he paced to and fro, his fists doubled up, and his forehead adorned with a scowl.

"Hello!" the major saluted, as he saw the giant. "Who's been carving you?"

"Thunder'n devils! who d'y'e suppose?" the mule-driver gasped, his uninjured optic flaming redly. "Who d'y'e suppose, ye fool?"

"Well, to be candid, I haven't the slightest idea, Henry. I supposed you were too big to let any one gouge ye up in this shape."

"Big? Great Hellen Blazes! Major, thar's nary a male mortal on ther face o' ther earth, as kin wrassle wi' ther great premium muleteer frum Webster City, an' I'll bet high on't."

"Then, am I to understand that it was a woman instead of a man, who peeled you?"

"Yes, sir-ee, et war a petticoater, and ther same petticoater who fayed you, major—she w'at calls herself Idaho Kit, cuss her."

"Indeed! The girl appears to be a very tigress. How did you come to get into her claws?"

"Oh! I followed her," the mule-driver grunted, rather sheepishly. "Sum galoot bet me I dassent ketch on ter ther gal and kiss her. Waal, neow, I don't generly bluff, wuth a cent, so I gambols off arter ther gal, an' w'en I overtook her, I jest dacently asked her to let me sample ther ambrosial sweetness o' her mug."

"Well, did she acquiesce to your demand?"

"Great Hellen Blazes, no! she jest give a screech like a red-hot tarrant'ler, an' she clumb me like a streak o' lightnin' goin' up a telegraph pole, and ther fust I know'd I didn't know nothin'. Results o' ther game—an enlargement o' ther mouth fer me, an' one spiled eye!"

"Why didn't you shoot the vagabond?"

"Shoot nothin'! She shot my senses out o' me afore I had time ter say Jack Robinson. Thunder, but she's a tearer."

"So it would seem. I shall have to attend to the case, myself. Where is the Sport, Gilt-Edged Dick?"

"In the bar-room, over at ther Vulcan saloon, reading the morning paper."

"Then come along. I am going to strike a blow at him, that will affect his popularity among these Leadvillains if a chance offers. I think I have my cue, all right. I will go ahead, and you may follow after me. Remember, you are to substantiate everything I say."

Horrible Hank nodded.

He understood perfectly what was expected of him, and ready was he to engage in any piece of a villainy, back of which was a prospect of cash, or a drink of whisky.

The major strode down the street, until he came to a saloon known as the United States, when he opened the door, and entered.

Though early in the morning, the saloon was well-filled with miners and adventurers, and sitting at a table, engaged in the perusal of a

paper, as he smoked a cigar, was the Sport, Gilt-Edged Dick.

The major saw him, and scowled, darkly, but said nothing. Waiting a chance was he to pounce upon the Sport, for he had a score of schemes ready in his mind, some of which he was sure must work.

And a trap soon was opened.

A prominent speculator of the town entered the saloon, and approached the bar.

"Can you let me have a five-hundred-dollar note, in exchange for five one hundreds, Mal-den?" he asked, of the proprietor.

"Sorry, but I hain't any of that denotation," the saloon-keeper replied. "But there's the Sport over there who is pretty flush of stamps. Maybe he can accommodate you, general."

"Yes, I reckon I can," Gilt-Edged Dick replied, having overheard the conversation, and from his vest pocket he took a huge roll of bills, and extracted one from the lot. This he handed to the speculator, who in turn gave him five one hundred dollar notes.

He was about hurrying from the saloon, when Major Doud stepped forward and intercepted him.

"Hold up, Mr. Pratt," he said. "Maybe this isn't any of my business, and again maybe I can be of some service to you, if you will let me see that note."

"You may see it, certainly," the speculator replied, in evident surprise. "I trust it is all right."

The major took the bill, gave it a glance, and then nodded knowingly, as he handed it back.

"Yes, it's all right maybe, if you are not sharp enough to detect it—but the bill is counterfeit!"

"Counterfeit?" the speculator echoed.

"Yes, counterfeit," the major assured. "I had a bill that was a very duplicate to that, a short time ago."

"What's this?" Gilt-Edged Dick asked, coming forward. "Who says the bill I gave that gentleman is counterfeit?"

"I say so," Major Doud declared, triumphantly. "I say so!"

"You?" the Sport said, calmly elevating his eyebrows. "Well! well! it must be so, if you say so, of course. I observe that you are a town's prophet. Let me look at the bill again, Mr. Pratt."

The speculator handed the note back, and Webster looked it over with a keen gaze.

"It is counterfeit, true enough, and I am glad the major interfered, for I am not in favor of circulating the bogus," he said, after a careful examination.

"Oh! that's yet to be proven," the major replied, with a covert sneer. "Perhaps it will be well enough for you to examine the rest of your wealth—you may have accidentally come into possession of some more of the queer."

"Certainly I shall make an examination of the rest," Gilt-Edged Dick replied, coolly. "I may possibly have ten thousand dollars' worth of this stuff aboard, for in the game of cards I played with one John Smith, a few nights since, I now recollect that he took my own pile of money, and I took his, they being of equal amounts. At the time, I thought nothing of it, and since then have not had cause to examine this money."

"A poor excuse is better than none," the major said, sarcastically. "For my part, I cannot account for the unlimited cheek some men have."

Gilt-Edged Dick did not reply, but took the roll of bills from his pocket and compared them, one by one, with the counterfeit note.

"They are all counterfeit!" he gasped at last, throwing them upon the floor, and grinding them beneath his heel fiercely. "I have been swindled out of ten thousand dollars and acknowledge myself beat!"

A murmur of astonishment ran through the crowd that had collected.

The Sport stood gazing at the mass of crumpled bills upon the floor, a strange, deadly glint in his eyes.

Major Dudley Doud took the cigar from his mouth, and blew a cloud of smoke into the air.

"You see how it is, gentlemen," he said, with quiet malice in his tone. "This sportive individual did accidentally discover some more of the queer in his possession, and it strikes me that the very fact has a suspicious savor!"

"Waal, neow, ef it don't I'll nevver lambaste another mule," Horrible Hank agreed. "Et pears kinder ter me like's if ther gilt-edged cuss warn't unaware o' ther kind o' rhino he kerried."

"See here!" Gilt-Edged Dick said, quickly;

"I want no more of these insinuations. If there are those in the crowd who believe that I am a professional counterfeit-shover, I want them to say so outright, and also want them to step out here and let me get one whack at them. I'll allow I came into this town to mind my own business, and to play a straight game, and I won't allow no man to run over me, or sling out hints he cannot back!"

"Oho! Well, maybe you think beca'se ye flopped ther major ontter his back, thet ther hull town is afeard ye, ye." Horrible Hank growled, with an ugly leer. "Mebbe ye calcylate thar ar' sum men as can't lick ye, or is afeard call ye a counterfeiter."

"I am waiting for some individual to call me that!" the Sport replied, coolly, as he drew a revolver from a sling upon his hip and deliberately cocked it. "I had just as soon make business for the undertaker now as at any other time, providing the timber is furnished me. I am not at all particular as to who the man is, either."

"I believe you intend that hint for me!" the major said, with a scowl; "but I do not grasp at it. I am too wise to accuse a man of anything that cannot be proven. The circumstance of your finding yourself in possession of so much bogus wealth certainly must be regarded as suspicious, and until we find you not guilty of an attempt to swindle our citizens, I recommend that you surrender yourself to the custody of the jail-keeper."

"Keerect! that's a fair an' square shake, an' ef ye kin prove that ye're a reg'lar calendar saint, an' unguilty o' shovin' ther queer, we, ther representatives o' ther town, will amend our constitoochinal by-laws and have you released."

"I think not!" Gilt-Edge replied, calmly. "In the first place, I have not surrendered yet, nor do I intend to, until some more forcible argument be brought to bear on me. I perceive that it is the opinion of you two rascals that I am guilty of intentionally passing counterfeit money, although you are too cowardly to admit it openly. Now, I do not care if you do think me guilty, or if the whole town thinks me guilty. I declare my innocence to one and all, and I'll drop the first man dead in his tracks who offers to raise a hand against me. Carry the news to Mary, for I mean business, and if you doubt it, begin to spill yourselves onto me just as quick as you please."

The situation was now exceedingly interesting. The blonde Sport stood with his back against the rear wall of the saloon, with two cocked revolvers instead of one in his hands, and both of them leveled upon the crowd, who stood agape, with Major Dudley Doud and Horrible Hank as relief-figures in the front of the rest.

There the crowd stood, some of them scowling, while others looked uncertain.

No love had these Leadvilleites for men who shoved the queer, or who were light-fingered, or still less compassion had they for a horse-thief.

And now that they stood in front of a counterfeiter, it was their will to fall upon him and destroy him.

But the prevailing will appeared not to be backed by the requisite courage. To venture into the jaws of death did not seem to be an enticing thing to these sons of carbon, and therefore they hesitated.

"Come on!" Gilt-Edged Dick called out; "don't stand there wanting to, but yet afraid. As I remarked before, I'll shoot the first man dead in his tracks who offers to raise a hand against me."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MAJOR'S EVIL ATTEMPT—SHOT!

"YES, come on! Are you all cowards that you hesitate to do your duty?" the major cried. "Go, take the Sport, you citizens of the town, as becomes men of your stamp, and hold him in custody until he can prove that he did not intentionally attempt to pass the counterfeit bill."

"Yas! waltz right up ter him, like a flock o' hornets, an' tickle him under the ribs;—use persuasive language emanating frum ther muzzle of a six-shooter, an' invite him ter a festival over yonder in ther jail!" assented the mule-driver, in delight.

Strong as were these suggestions, they had not the effect to advance the smoldering, angry elements. The cold steel tubes of Gilt-Edged Dick's revolvers were calibred for twelve deaths, and some of those who ventured forward to capture the blonde Sport, were bound

to intercept some of these flying bullets; they had no heroic desire to court martyrdom, and therefore they hesitated—were literally held at bay by one man.

"Gentlemen," Mr. Pratt, the speculator, said, looking over the crowd, calmly, "I think you have no cause for this sudden hostility against the Sport. To my positive knowledge he did play a game of cards for ten thousand dollars a side, with one John Smith, a few nights since, and got beat, and Smith raked in his stakes, leaving his own upon the board. Another game was played, and the Sport won, and I distinctly remember that Smith shoved Webster over his stake, so that there was a mutual interchange of money. I saw all this myself, or I should be in favor of arresting the Sport, myself. As the matter stands I have no charge to make against him."

"You are a fool!" Major Doud growled, savagely, seeing that he had no chance now, to catch his enemy. "If I had my say, this Gilt-Edged individual should prove beyond peradventure, how he came into possession of the counterfeit money. I do not believe in letting criminals escape unpunished!"

"Then, am I to understand that you consider me a criminal?" Dick demanded, approaching, coolly.

"Yes! curse you, you are a criminal, a counterfeit-shover, and moreover, in all likelihood you are Jabez Carter the road-agent. There, now—refute the charges, if you dare!"

"Well, I do refute them, by pronouncing you an unmitigated liar!" the Sport replied, sternly. "It is evident you have not got your fill of satisfaction from me, my pilgrim, and I will give you more rope to work in!"

And raising his arm, the blonde "iceberg," as some one had nicknamed him, slapped the major fairly across the mouth with the flat of his hand—a terrible blow it was, that sent the candidate staggering back to the floor. Without pausing to note the effect of his act, the Sport then stepped to the bar, relit his cigar, and sauntered leisurely from the saloon as if nothing had happened, for not a hand was raised to hinder his exit.

Straight to the Tontine the Sport went, and to the section of rooms which he had secured for his accommodation, consisting of a little parlor and two small bedchambers.

Little Pearl was seated at a window, idly thrumming upon a handsome guitar, but laid it aside and sprung to the Sport's embrace, as he entered.

"Papa! papa! I am so glad you have come," she said, throwing her arms about his neck, as the stalwart Sport raised her in his own strong arms. "I got so frightened, while you were out—so scared."

"What! my little pet get frightened? What at, pray? I supposed she was as brave as the bravest!" And the Sport sat down upon the sofa with the little maiden upon his knee, and softly stroked her beautiful hair. "Tell me, dear, what was it that frightened you?"

"Oh! papa! it was a woman—a nice-dressed, stylish-looking woman, such as I have often dreamed was my mamma. She came along down the sidewalk on the other side of the street, and when she got opposite our rooms she paused, looked up, and shook her fist at me."

"Pshaw! You only imagined the fist-shaking part, did you not, my child?"

"No! papa! indeed I did not. I saw her do it, and she scowled at me in an angry manner."

"Well! what then?"

"Then she went on down the street, I don't know where."

Gilt-Edged Dick was silent, a shadow lurking upon his forehead. Evidently he had recognized the woman by Little Pearl's description; the gleam that now shot into his eyes was simple assurance that he could be defiant.

"The woman is evidently an old enemy of mine, dear," he said, stroking the child's hair, softly—"a bitter enemy, with ingenuity enough in scheming for a brace of arch-devils. But she cannot harm you, my little Pearl, if you are brave and regard the instructions I have often given you. Have you your pistol with you, pet?"

"Yes, papa!" And from a pocket in her dress the child brought a small gold-mounted revolver, whose sights were set with diamonds.

"Here it is."

"Very good. Yonder upon the door-case crawls a fly. Let me see if you have forgotten how to brush it off."

The little maiden smiled up into his eyes, confidently; then turning she cocked her tiny weapon, and fired with astonishing quickness.

Rising, Gilt-Edged Dick crossed the room,

Gilt-Edged Dick.

and found the fly lying upon the carpet, minus one of its wings.

"Well done," he said, catching the child again in his embrace, and kissing her, rapturously. "You are a better marksman than I, Pearl. And if any one offers to do you harm, you must serve him or her the same as you did the fly. Above all, look out for the woman who shook her fist at you. Remain closely in your room, and you will not be harmed. I will see that the security of the house is extended you."

"You are not going to leave me, papa?"

"Yes, my child, for a short time I must leave you here, to look out for yourself. I have business to attend to which demands my whole attention, and I may be absent some days. But you will not be afraid, my pet, will you?"

"No, papa! I will be very brave, and trust in the Lord. He will help me through."

"Right, little one. He will watch over the innocent."

And then kissing her again and again, the Sport took his departure.

Descending first to the restaurant underneath, he gave the courteous proprietor some instructions in regard to little Pearl; then he lit a cigar and went out upon the street. By a previous order, a hostler had already brought around his superb horse, and leaping into the saddle the Sport galloped away toward California gulch, leisurely, exciting many complimentary remarks from spectators who admired his saddle pose.

Away he dashed, entering the deep gulch which was a wing of the town, and following along its rugged bottom until civilization had been left behind, and he found himself in a wild, mountainous country, where solitude reigned supreme.

Here he dismounted, and secured his horse to a strong sapling; then changed his rifle from the saddle-bow to his shoulder, and continued on.

On up the mountain side with sweeping strides, following a well beaten trail, and keeping his gaze roving on either side went the Sport. Evident it was that he was in search of something, but what, one could not determine by any move or act of his.

For several hours he continued on, winding up and around the mountain through pine and brush, as if endeavoring to reach the extreme top.

At last he emerged upon a narrow ledge of rock, and paused to get a breath of the pure flower-scented air that wafted down from the nor'west.

As he did so, there came the sharp twang of a rifle, and he staggered back a pace, a stinging sensation in the breast. Before he could collect his senses, the rifle cracked again, and a bullet glanced across his temple, and he fell to the ground insensible, the blood spurting from the wounds in breast and forehead.

Evidently the assassin had aimed to kill, and had not come far short of his mark.

For an hour the Sport lay upon the very edge of the ledge, as still as though he were dead; then footsteps came down the mountain, and later a woman glided onto the plateau with a little cry of horror.

She was pretty of form, and young in years, evidently, for her step possessed elasticity, and her form the roundness of youth. She was clad in a serviceable costume of buckskin, the skirt reaching to a pretty pair of ankles and feet, which were incased in buckskin leggings and moccasins.

Her face was covered with a full mask; a slouch hat upon her head finishing her costume.

Evidently she had seen the Sport from above, for she ran forward, and knelt by his side, with a low cry of anxiety.

"Thank God he is not dead!" she murmured, after placing her ear to his breast, "but he is wounded, and can not long survive, unless the flow of blood is stanched. I wonder if I can carry him?"

Stooping she raised the insensible Sport bodily in her arms, and staggered across the ledge to an aperture in the rocks, which proved to be the entrance to a cave. Into it she made her staggering way, bravely, the great weight of her burden causing her to pant.

The cavern proved to be a large one, of considerable width, and great length. Evidently it was one of the wonders of nature's hand, for surely no human had ever wrought out the great apartment in the heart of the mountain.

Back through the whole length of the cavern did the girl carry the insensible Sport, until she came to an opening similar to that which she had first entered.

The cavern at this point was turned into an

abode, evidently, for there was a couch of skins, some cooking utensils, and stools.

The masked maiden laid the Sport upon the couch, and darting out of the cavern was gone for a few moments, returning finally with a basin of water.

This she applied to the Sport's forehead, and to his wounds, which had by this time nearly stopped bleeding. The wound in his left breast was not dangerous, but the one upon his forehead might have been the cause of his death, had it been a half-inch further toward the center.

The water as applied by the maiden, soon manifested its effect by slowly restoring the Sport to consciousness, and he sat up and gazed around in surprise.

"Where am I—who are you?" were the first questions he asked, as he gazed at the maiden.

"Ah! I remember—I was shot!"

"Yes, you were shot," the maiden replied, approaching and standing near. "I accidentally came across your body and brought you here."

"Which is very good of you. Do you know who shot me?"

"I don't know for certain. I heard two shots fired, but did not see any one."

"It was doubtless the work of some of my enemies in Leadville," Dick said. "How much am I hurt?"

"Not seriously, I trust. You have a bullet in the left breast, but in a fleshy part, and the cut upon your temple, which stunned you."

"Lucky that it was not worse. Excuse me, lady, but your wearing of a mask leads me to be curious as to yourself. Have you any objections to telling me who you are?"

"My name is—Coral Carter," the maiden responded, hesitatingly. "I always wear a mask—they say because I am so homely. Perhaps they are right."

"I trust not, lady, for the form betokens a lovely face. The name Carter is not a strange one—there is a Jabez Carter, road-agent, I believe."

"Of course!" the maiden replied, dryly. "Jabez Carter is a road-agent, and I am, unluckily, his child."

"You?" and the Sport started strangely.

"Yes, I! Or at least I have no reason to think different, as he has ever claimed me as his daughter."

"You do not seem to be proud of your relation to the road-agent, judging by your words?"

"Nor am I. Jabez Carter is not a father for one to be proud of. He is a wretch as sour and merciless as human can be."

"No need to tell me this, lady. The road-agent is no stranger to me by reputation. I have heard of him, and I may add that it is a part of my mission in the carbon region to find and bring him to justice."

"You then are Gilt-Edged Dick, the famous mountain detective?"

"I am Gilt-Edged Dick; I was not aware that my fame had already preceded me into this wild region."

"Then you were behind your calculations, for Jabez Carter was aware of your coming by the time you reached Leadville, and rightly guessed your errand."

"And one of his tools took me in, to the tune of ten thousand dollars, I suspect!" Gilt-Edged replied. "Is not John Smith, card-sharp, one of the lights of Jabez Carter's troupe?"

"He is. Did he play with you, and win?"

"He did. He won the first game, and raked in my cash. We played again, and I got his stake back again."

"And is was counterfeit?"

"Every dollar of it!"

"I am sorry for you. I did not know the trap was set for you, until I heard Smith boasting of his victory, this morning. If I could have seen you I should have bade you not play, as there is no man in the mines who can beat him, when he plays to win!"

"Then you think he allowed me to win?"

"Undoubtedly. That is his usual game—you are not the first man who has been bitten."

"Perhaps not. But, mark me, I shall bite back, yet. I do not often allow a pilgrim to get ahead of me. You know my mission in this country—cannot we strike a bargain by which you are to give up the road-agent and counterfeiting gang? You evidently have no love for Jabez Carter, and there are enough rewards afloat to make you rich, besides allowing me a liberal compensation for my trouble."

Coral Carter shook her head, quickly.

"No, sir, you can make no such bargain with me. Although I am a firm believer in justice, and an enemy of all criminals, I am bound by a terrible oath never to betray my father or any

member of his gang, and I never break my word. You will have to seek another to aid in your mission, than me."

CHAPTER IX.

IDIOT IKE ON THE WAR-PATH.

"VERY well, lady. I will not attempt to persuade you against your will. I might have known you would refuse to betray your father, be he ever so cruel a parent," Gilt-Edged Dick said, considerably.

"Were it not for my oath, I should not hesitate to betray Jabez Carter and his gang, and aid in their delivery to justice," the masked maiden declared. "He has no claim upon me that I honor, except my oath. He is a heartless wretch, equally cruel to every one, even his own tools who serve him. Were he a thousand times my father, and engaged in unlawful business, I would betray him to justice, but for my oath. That I cannot break."

"Nor will I ask you, lady. I am satisfied that you would aid me, were it in your power. I believe you to be a friend to honesty and justice, and accordingly you are my friend. Let me ask you one more question—do you live in the outlaws' stronghold?"

"Part of the time—a very small part, too, for I am ever roving about."

"But you have free access to the retreat?"

"Yes—I come and go as I please. The money which Smith swindled you out of I will endeavor to restore to you. That I can do without breaking my oath."

"Do so, and it shall pay you well, for your reward shall not be small, lady. Although by no means beggared by the loss of so large a sum, I felt it keenly," the Sport said, bowing.

"Now, if you will show me which way Leadville lies, I will thank you for your kindness to me, and endeavor to get back to my hotel."

"No, I cannot allow that yet. You are wounded, and it is not safe for you to attempt to reach Leadville until you are sufficiently restored. You must remain here, and you shall have the best care I can bestow upon you."

"I will remain a short time if you insist, but it cannot be long. I have other business to attend to in Leadville, and must get to work as soon as possible."

Coral Carter now moved about, and from various niches in the cavern wall brought forth coffee and roasted meat, and placed them at the Sport's disposal. Then bidding him remain quiet, until she returned, she left the cavern, and Dick saw no more of her for several hours. But he concluded that she had gone to the road-agent stronghold, probably in search of the gambler Smith, with a view to regaining possession of the Sport's money.

This was only a conjecture, however, and Dick waited impatiently for her return.

The woman of the little cabin in Stray Horse gulch had died.

A few miners and their wives from the adjoining cabins, had dropped in when apprised of the fact by the sniveling, idiotic creature who people had said was her son.

They found a stiffening rigid form, surmounted by a distorted face; evident it was the woman who had died in great pain. Poverty and distress were everywhere present in the cabin, so the miners set to work and nailed up a coffin-shaped pine box, and the miners' wives laid out the stiffened form.

At sunset it was buried, near the cabin, only a little knot of neighbors being present, for nothing could be found or had been seen of Idiot Ike since morning.

He had last been seen upon the mountain, with his rifle upon his shoulder, acting in a wild manner, and some one had prophesied that he would soon end his miserable existence.

But they reckoned wrongly.

That night Idiot Ike was roving about the streets of Leadville, with a burning glitter in his eye, having no apparent object in his movements more than to watch the mass of humanity that surged to and fro.

This seeming indifference, however, was deceptive. With the eyes of a hawk he scrutinized every face sharply, as if trying to recognize the man he sought.

All the evening he lounged about the street, first in one place and then in another, watching and waiting with the patience of a fox-hound.

Nobody paid him the least attention, for he was not at all an attractive personage, with his great head covered by a shock of reddish hair, his wild staring eyes, and contorted mouth. No one knew or cared for him, consequently he was not noticed, particularly.

Until ten o'clock at night he lingered in the street, when his eyes suddenly emitted a venomous sparkle as he saw Miss Stapleton, the financier's daughter, pass along.

Evidently she was the one he had been watching for, for his teeth shut with a strange click, and he leaned forward, with a frightful scowl upon his face. After she had proceeded some distance up the street, he stole silently after her, but carrying himself in such a way that no one might suspect his design. If Miss Stapleton walked fast, he walked fast—if she walked slowly, he followed her example in that respect, keeping at a regular distance in her rear.

At last she reached the hotel where she had lodgings, and swept up the broad staircase with the air of a princess.

Idiot Ike slyly watched her from the foot of the stairs, until he saw which direction she took from the top of the landing; then he, too, crept up the stairs as stealthily as a cat.

In this manner he reached the door of Miss Stapleton's parlor, which was slightly ajar, and peering through the crack, he beheld her standing before the mirror removing her hat. With a chuckle, he pushed the door further ajar, and darted in, closing and locking it behind him.

Miss Stapleton wheeled around from her position before the mirror, and uttered a little scream of horror when she saw him, her face turning even whiter than was its natural tint.

"Mercy! Who are you? What do you want? What do you mean?" she gasped, trembling with fear and apprehension.

Idiot Ike grinned maliciously, and drew a long-bladed knife from his boot-leg, in a suggestive fashion, and whetted deliberately upon his instep.

"You be old Stapleton's gal, not?" he demanded, when he had sharpened the blade to his satisfaction. "You be old Stapleton's gal, what is rich as Croesus or sum other cuss?"

"Yes, I am Louise Stapleton. Surely you do not mean me harm?" the financier's daughter said, ready to faint with terror.

"I reckon," the idiot replied, with a foolish grin. "You be old Stapleton's darter, an' I be old Stapleton's son. My mammy is dead. She told me to hate you and old Stapleton, because you deserted us. I'm goin' to cut off your hand and use it for a foot-ball. Ho! ho!"

"Oh! mercy! mercy! Spare me! spare me! I never harmed you, sir—I never hurt you—I do not even know who you are."

"But I know who you are—you're old Stapleton's gal, and you be my sister, an' I hate ye," was the reply. "I come and kill you just for fun. Then I kill old Stapleton, too, for mammy said so."

And with a chuckle the idiot glided nearer, flourishing the gleaming blade and grinning horribly.

With loud screams Miss Stapleton retreated, step by step, her terror knowing no bounds.

To be murdered thus in cold blood was a horrible thought, and murder, evidently, was the idiot's intention.

But the crime was destined not to be committed, for the door was burst open, and Major Dudley Doud leaped into the room.

Evidently he had heard Miss Stapleton's screams, and instantly comprehending the situation, he seized the idiot by the collar and jerked him to the floor. Then springing upon him, he held him down where he had fallen.

"Let me up! let me up!" the idiot growled, savagely. "Let me up, or I'll cut your heart out."

"No you won't," the major assured, triumphantly. "I've got you down, and I'm going to hold you until you are safely bound. Miss Stapleton, can you procure a rope and assist me?"

The financier's daughter assented by procuring straps from an adjoining room, and binding the feet and wrists of her assailant. In a few minutes the idiot was safely secured.

"Cuss ye!" he gritted, glaring first from one to the other. "I'll be the death o' ye, yet. I'll cut your hearts out and use 'em for fox-bait. He! he! he! fox bite at heart bait, you bet. He! he! he!"

"We'll see about that, directly," the major said. "Miss Louie, my dear, do you know who the creature is?"

"No more than that he is evidently demented, and asserts that he is my brother," Miss Stapleton replied.

"Ha! ha! now that's pretty good. Your brother, eh? Why the chap must certainly be crazy, or else you have neglected to mention this member of your family to me."

"I'm not crazy—I'm a fool!" Ike announced. "I don't know any thing—I'm an idiot. He! he!"

"So I should judge. Louie, my dear, what do you propose to do with the fellow? He is evidently a dangerous person to be abroad."

"I don't know, just at present. Gag him and leave him in the other room. My father can attend to him, when he comes. I was just out upon the street looking for you. I have business!"

"Good. I never was in more readiness than now."

"Well, the Sport, Gilt-Edged Dick, is missing—not been seen since morning. Do you know what has become of him?"

"No, I do not."

"Well, he is gone, and the child is yet at the Tontine. Now is our best chance to abduct her!"

"How? Give's the twig, and I'm ready."

"Easy enough. You go and disguise yourself and inquire at the hotel for Gilt-Edge Dick's daughter. When she is produced you can explain that you were sent for her by Dick, who is dying at a cabin up in Stray Horse Gulch. This will effectually ward off suspicion, and the child will accompany you, until you meet me in Stray Horse. I will then determine what shall be done with her."

The major bowed, and after a few more words, hauled the idiot into an adjoining room, and then took his departure.

To his own lodgings he went, and soon succeeded in effectually disguising himself by the addition of false beard and wig, and an exchange of clothing.

He then took himself to the Tontine, and sought out the proprietor, whom he found in the bar-room.

"Good evening," the disguised villain said. "I am in search of a little girl who was left in your charge by a fellow named Gilt-Edged Dick. He told me I would find her in your care."

"Yes, I have such a child in my care, but I also have orders from Gilt-Edged Dick not to let her leave the hotel under any pretext," the proprietor replied.

"I know—he told me so, but at that time the poor fellow did not calculate upon being hurt, and he told me to tell you it would be all right if you gave the little one over into my charge."

"Hurt did you say?"

"Yes. He was up where they were blasting at the Redowa mine, to-day, and a tiny piece of rock entered his breast from the blast. The cool galoot didn't say much, but sunk to the ground, and on examination we found that he war bleedin' like a stuck pig. We finally got ther flow checked, but he told us it wouldn't do no good, as he war bleedin' internally. So we carried him over to my shanty, and he told me ter cum an' fetch ther little 'un, as he wanted ter see her afore he died. I reckon this paper's what'll explain."

And the disguised major handed the proprietor of the Tontine a scrap of paper, which he had thoughtfully provided himself with, before starting out on his villainous mission.

It was a ragged scrawl, meant to imitate the handwriting of a man whose nerves were unsteady, and read as follows:

"DEAR SIR.—I am wounded—sayin' I guess, and I want to see my little daughter. Give her in charge of the bearer of this note, and it will be all right." —GILT-EDGED DICK."

The restaurant proprietor read it over several times, and then gazed at the disguised major keenly.

"I don't know about this," he said, thoughtfully. "It is an entirely different style of chirography from that used by the Sport when he registered here. And the fact that I have heard nothing of the reported accident makes me believe that there is some villainy back of all this. What is your name, sir?"

"William Wallace, I reckon. By occupation, I am a miner."

The proprietor paced across the room and thoughtfully, Dudley Doud watching narrowly.

"I have decided not to let the child go," the proprietor answered, finally. "I was ordered not to let her go under any pretext, and by keeping her until the Sport calls for her, I shall only be following his instructions."

"Very well, if this is your decision I am not to blame, as I have fulfilled my errand. The Sport will probably never see his child, as he was fast nearing death when I came away."

And with the words the foiled villain turned as if to leave the room. He calculated that perhaps his last words would move the proprietor and cause him to revoke his decision.

And he had calculated correctly, for the proprietor did change his mind, and called him back, just as he was about to leave the room.

"Hold on. I've about made up my mind that you can take the child if she is willing to go. I scarcely know what to believe. Perhaps the instinct of the child will be keener than mine, and if so she will refuse to go, and I shall gratify her wishes by keeping her."

Calling a waiter, he dispatched him for Little Pearl—Gilt-Edge's child.

The major was triumphant, for he felt sure that his plot, or rather that of Miss Stapleton, was about to prosper.

The servant soon returned, leading Pearl by the hand, and gave her to the proprietor, who raised her upon his knee, admiringly.

"Little girl, this man," pointing to the disguised Dudley Doud, "has come, he says, to take you to your papa, who he says was badly hurt to-day, and wants to see you. Do you want to go with him?"

Pearl's big blue eyes gazed straight at the villain, searching and steadily, until he was forced to flinch. She saw his evident agitation, and shivered.

"No! no! I do not want to go with him. He is a bad, wicked man!" she said.

"But you shall go, my girl!" the major suddenly hissed, in a passion, and springing forward he dealt the proprietor a blow in the face, of stunning force, seized the child in his arms, and leaped toward the door.

Ere any one could stop him, he was in the street, which at this late hour was quite deserted. A saddled horse stood in front of the Tontine; into the saddle he vaulted, and a moment later was speeding madly down the street at the top of the animal's speed.

CHAPTER X.

THE SPORT TO THE RESCUE.

BULLET after bullet was fired at him, but without apparent effect; then some of the bolder ones procured horses, and set out in pursuit. But this, too, was useless, for by the time they were ready to start the disguised major and his captive were far away.

A few miles from town in the dark depths of Stray Horse Gulch, he met Miss Stapleton, by which time poor little Pearl had fainted from sheer affright. The financier's daughter was well mounted, and wrapped in a heavy cloak, with a veil drawn over her face to conceal her identity.

"Ah! you've got her, eh?" she demanded, as Dudley Doud rode up.

"Yes, by stealing her at the risk of my life. You needn't say now that I will do nothing in your cause."

"I heard the firing, and concluded that you were having trouble. Did you get hurt?"

"No, although some of the bullets flew pretty close to my head. What are you going to do with this brat?"

"I scarcely know. The people I had hoped to leave her with are gone. Do you not know of some safe retreat where I can hide her forever from the world?"

"Hardly from the world, for civilization strides rapidly on, and encroaches upon all nooks and hiding places. There is an old hog above here, who is partially demented—perhaps you might make terms with her."

"Then, lead on, and I will bargain with her. Is the child in a faint?"

"Yes, I reckon she got skeered purty badly." Without further words Dudley Doud led the way, Miss Stapleton following close behind him.

The patience of Gilt-Edged Dick was about exhausted when finally he heard a footprint, and to his surprise the Girl Sport, Idaho Kit, came bounding into the cavern—the same cool character in whose behalf he had once interceded—the same handsome sharp who had fleeced the Leadvillites out of their ducats, by the simple twist of the wrist and the nimbleness of her fingers, combined perhaps with the nimbleness of her tongue.

Her face was now flushed, and even prettier than before, and her eyes flashed excitedly.

"You must get out o' here," she said. "The captain has discovered by spying around that you're here, and he's climbin' up here like two-forty on the half shell!"

"You mean Carter, the road-agent?"

"Yes, that same identical cuss. Oh! he don't luv ye more than sum hull families, I reckon, and your best hol is to puckachee!"

"But the girl—Coral Carter!" Dick said—"I was waiting for her. She was to bring me back the cash, out of which I was swindled, in Leadville."

Idaho Kit laughed.

"No use waitin' fer her, as she is as uncertain as a town-clock. Ef she said she'd come back,

ve can about calculate she won't do nothin' o' the kind. Hello! you're wounded, eh?"

"Yes, slightly; but am yet better than two deal men. Do you know the way out of this place?"

"Yes, I reckon so. If you've got any shootin'-irons, ye'd better pull'em out, and look at 'em, fer most likely we'll git a blaze at the agents, afore we git out o' ther wilderness. What ever fetched you out into the mountains?"

"A desire to capture this road-agent, Jabez Carter, and bring him to justice," the Mountain Sport and Detective confessed. "Some one shot me on my way hither, and the road-agent's daughter brought me in here and cared for me."

"Do you know who salivated you?"

"No. I only wish I did."

"Well, I can accommodate you with a little information on the subject. I recently saw the ruffian, Horrible Hank, lurking in the vicinity and reckon it was him."

"Very likely. He probably was dogging me at the instigation of the man called Major Doud. I shall endeavor to effect a permanent settlement with them both. I am ready to go, now."

Idaho Kit nodded, and led the way out of the cavern by the same route by which Dick had first entered.

Leaving the cavern, they descended the mountain side, the Girl Sport leading the way carefully, and cautiously.

A light and graceful of step as a fawn was she, and just fitted for the wild, rollicking life of a mountain guide.

An hour of toil brought them among the footings, and they shortly reached the gulch bottom, where Gilt-Edge found his horse still tethered.

"I will bid you good-by, here," Idaho Kit said, extending her hand, "and see you later in Leadville. I guess you can do the distance be-twixt here and there without any danger."

"I reckon. I thank you for your trouble; when you need help of any kind, come to me."

Then Gilt-Edged Dick mounted and galloped away toward Leadville, arriving there late in the night, as it was dark when he left Idaho Kit.

Before the Tontine he stopped, and dismounting, entered the restaurant.

On entering, the first man he encountered was the proprietor, who looked suddenly guilty as he saw the Sport.

"You've heard about it?" he inquired, stopping the Sport hesitatingly—"you've heard about it?"

"Heard about what? I have heard of nothing—came straight from the mountains here. What do you mean?" Webster demanded, something like a suspicion of the truth entering his mind.

"Why—why—your child—your little girl has been abducted!"

"Been abducted?" Gilt-Edged Dick fairly yelled. "Man, do not tell me a lie about this!"

"Indeed I am not lying," the proprietor assured. And then, as best he could, he related the facts of the capture of little Pearl.

Gilt-Edged Dick heard him through with a face that had turned suddenly white, but was as outwardly calm as the stoical Sport himself.

Whatever were his emotions, he evidently did not choose to make a display of them in public, for a score or more had gathered around to note the effect of the news upon him. There was, however, a gleam in his eyes that betokened no good to the offender.

"I think I know the agency of the abduction of my child," he said, coolly. "Was not the abductor about like this Major Doud you have here, in size and gait?"

"Perhaps, yes," the restaurateur replied, "but surely you would not suspect the major of such a hand?"

"As quickly as I would suspect a cat of catching a robin, had she a fair chance," Gilt-Edge replied. "Is the major in town now? If you can find him, I'll forfeit a gold eagle."

And Gilt-Edged Dick turned and left the saloon.

On the porch of the Tontine he paused and gazed up and down the street.

"Louise is in town, and this is her accursed work, although I am satisfied that Doud was the abductor," he muttered to himself. "Poor little Pearl! If she has fallen into the merciless hands of Louise Stapleton, there is no telling what indignities she may suffer, although I do not believe they would kill her. No doubt the abduction is part of a plan to extort money from me. But they shall fail, curse them!—they shall find that I can beat them both at

their own game. If Louise Stapleton is in her lodgings, I must see her. She shall give me up my child or I will tear out her heart and tread upon it with my feet!"

The decision made, he ordered his horse taken care of, and then set off up the street toward the hotel where the Stapletons stopped, for he had previously taken pains to acquaint himself with this item of knowledge.

Arrived at the hotel, he did not enter the waiting-room, but ascended the staircase to the first landing, where he was fortunate enough to meet a chambermaid, who, in consideration of a quarter, condescended to point out the rooms occupied by the Leadville financier and his daughter.

Without invitation or ceremony, the Sport entered the parlor of the suit, to find it in darkness, and empty, at that. With matches he soon lighted a lamp, however, and proceeded to investigate.

The parlor being tenantless, he entered one of the sleeping apartments, only to find that empty also. The next one visited, however, offered no disclosure.

Upon the floor, helplessly bound and gagged, lay the Idiot Ike, where he had been left by Dudley Doud.

"Hello! what does this mean?" Gilt-Edged Dick muttered. "There has been foul play here, evidently. I wonder who this individual is, anyhow, and how he came in this fix?"

A couple of sweeps of the Sport's knife freed the idiot of his bonds and gag, and at once he was upon his feet.

He gave the Sport a grateful glance, and would have darted from the room, only that Dick interrupted him.

"Hold on," he said firmly, drawing a revolver, and confronting the idiot. "Don't be in a hurry. If you don't mind, I'd like to interview you as to how you came in here, in such a fix."

The idiot looked suddenly sullen.

"I cum here ter see my sister, and she an' another galoot held ther most trumps, an' won," he replied, with a grin.

"Your sister—not Miss Stapleton?"

"Yas, old Stapleton's gal. He be my daddy, and I be his gal's brother. They deserted me an' mammy, an' I kill 'em, yet."

Gilt-Edge immediately saw pretty near how matters stood.

Years before when, in a blind moment, he had wedded Louise Stapleton, he had learned that there was a skeleton in the family closet, but just what was its nature he had not been able to ascertain.

This idiot then was a disowned offspring of Oliver Stapleton!

Richard Webster gave vent to a low whistle of surprise at the discovery.

"Then your sister turned against you?"

"Yes, cuss her!"

"Who was with her?"

"A man came in and attacked me from behind."

"Oh! What was his name?"

"She called him Dudley Doud."

"Ah! The tiger and the tigress have formed a partnership, then? What is your name young man?"

"I'm Idiot Ike, fer short; I'm a fool!" and the speaker's face suddenly assumed a broad grin.

"Oh! you're a fool, eh?" Gilt-Edged Dick replied, dryly. "Perhaps; but I should not be surprised if those who think you are a fool are the greatest fools. Where did this worthy sister of yours go?"

"Why do you want to know?" Ike demanded, a little sourly.

"Because she has done me a great wrong, and I wish to find her."

"Then ye ain't her friend?"

"No—more her enemy than her friend, I reckon."

"Then I'm your friend. I'm a fool, but mebbe I kin be o' sum service to you. The gal an' Doud left me layin' here, and Doud went furst, an' the gal afterward. They were goin' to steal some little girl, an' take her off into the mountains, I reckon, from what I could understand."

"Exactly," Dick said, quietly. "The little girl was my child, and they have succeeded in capturing her. Did you hear them speak of extorting money from Gilt-Edged Dick?"

"Yes. I heard 'em say sumthin' like it."

"Good. I have no fear now that they mean little Pearl harm. They think to keep her until I will pay a big ransom. Let them think so—I will outwit them yet. I want to hire you to help me."

"Hire me?" the idiot cried. "All right; I am a fool, and will help you. What shall I do?"

"Remain here. Get in under the bed, when you hear any one coming, and listen, committing all you can down to memory. When you learn anything that you think will be interesting to me, report, at the Tontine, where you will probably find me."

"All right. When I get hungry—what then?"

"Oh! as to that, here is gold—ten dollars. When you get hungry, sneak cautiously out, and get you something to eat. Then, sneak back again. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I will help you, because you late my enemies. I will help you to crush them, like a worm beneath your feet."

"And crush them I will!" Gilt-Edged Dick said, fiercely, as he turned and left the room.

After he had gone Ike Stapleton extinguished the light, and sat down upon a chair in the darkness, his head bowed upon his hands.

"Yes, so will I crush them," he muttered, hoarsely. "I am a fool, and have always been a fool, and shall always be a fool, but I still know enough to fight my enemies. Ha! ha! yes—when I am mad I am most sane and sensible. I am mad, now, and I'll serve Gilt-Edged Sport, and likewise serve myself. I have not forgotten the oath that mammy taught me—the vengeful oath to kill Oliver Stapleton, who deserted her, and left her upon the cruel mercies of the world. Ho! ho! how I will triumph, when I run the game down to the death!"

The whole appearance of the idiot seemed to have undergone a sudden change. The vacant stare was gone from his eyes; his form appeared possessed of more than usual strength; his muscles worked as if he were in the act of beginning a pitched battle with somebody.

For some time he remained in this condition; then the sound of footsteps ascending the stairs seemed to arouse him from a reverie, and he skulked from the parlor into the bedroom.

A moment later Oliver Stapleton entered the room, and after a considerable fumbling around, and a good deal of swearing, he succeeded in lighting a lamp.

"Where can Louise have gone?" he growled, on glancing into either sleeping apartment and not discovering her. "It is approaching morning, and she should be in her bed. Confound the girl, I suppose I shall have to wait for her. Off with that Dudley Doud, no doubt, the Lord only knows where."

The Leadville financier had evidently been imbibing the ardent too freely, and the effect was extreme nervousness, as he glanced around him sharply before seating himself. Even after he had lighted a cigar, and took up an evening paper, he occasionally glanced around as if not quite satisfied—as if having a premonition of approaching danger.

And perhaps his intuition was correct—perhaps, we say, for in the midst of an article on mining, over which he was partially dreaming, he was suddenly aroused by the touch of something cold against his cheek, and wheeled with a startled yell to find himself in the presence of one he most dreaded of all beings, and that one—

CHAPTER XI.
IKE'S DEMAND—THE SPORT AND MISS STAPLETON.

WAS Idiot Ike.

He stood before the financier as he faced around, a horrible grin upon his face, as he pressed the muzzle of a cocked revolver against the other's cheek.

"Merciful Heaven! It is the idiot!" Oliver Stapleton gasped, instantly recalling the scene at the lone cabin in Stray Horse Gulch, and the words of Marie, his long-deserted wife.

"Yes, it's ther fool, sure enough, pappy Stapleton. Thot you'd recognize me, if I came!"

"Go away! Take away that weapon! What do you want?" the financier demanded, thoroughly frightened. "Why do you come here?"

"Because I want to," Ike replied doggedly. "I reckon I don't have to ask nobody whether I can or not. I came down here to see you, because you are my pap, and I wanted a fair squint at you."

"I your father! Impossible, sir!" and the financier turned fairly purple with rage. "You have struck the wrong lead, young man."

"Oh! you bet I ain't," Ike exclaimed. "Mammy pointed you out to me, one day, and then, besides that, yer name's Stapleton which be my own, an' I be yer offspring, em' ye know it!"

"Curse you!" Oliver Stapleton breathed, half between fear and rage. "What do you want?"

"I want money, for one thing," the idiot answered promptly, still keeping the financier covered with his weapon. "I want money, and I know you'd just as lieve give it to me as not. Eh? daddy?"

"Not a cent, you devil. I owe you nothing, nor will I pay you a cent. If that is what brought you here, you had better go."

"I won't go," Ike cried fiercely. "Not till I get ready at least. Mammy made me swear ter kill ye, an' I'm goin' to do it. I'm a fool, but I know my p's and q's, sometimes. If you'll pay me well, I'll give you a short re-ovieve; if not, I'll kill you now!"

"And hang for it, within the next hour!"

"Bah! I care not, after I have executed my vengeance—after I have killed you. I had as soon die as live then, for I am only a fool, and of no particular use in the world!"

And the idiot laughed wildly in anticipation of the triumph he should have, while the financier groaned, for this was exceeding gall and wormwood to his proud spirit.

But the pistol still continued leveled in the idiot's hand and there could be no doubt but that he meant to do just as he had declared.

"How much will you ask to leave the room, and never bother me again?" he demanded, turning sternly upon the idiot.

"Nothing!" was the evasive reply.

"Nothing?" the speculator interrogated.

"Nothing," Ike repeated. "You cannot buy me off that way. I'll take a thousand dollars, now, and more when I think I need it. Come! I am not going to wait long fer ye ter produce it."

Oliver Stapleton immediately took a large wallet from his pocket and counted out ten one-hundred-dollar bills, and handed them to the idiot.

"There now; be gone! It is the last you will ever get from me!" he growled, pointing toward the door.

With a grin the fool obeyed, and soon was upon the street.

Yet Ike, the faithful sleuth that he was, never quitted the vicinity, but hung around with dogged determination, awaiting the return of Louise Stapleton and Dudley Doud, from their nocturnal mission.

Gilt-Edged Dick, on leaving the idiot, had gone back to the Tontine, and to his own suit of rooms, to calmly await the issue.

He was confident that it would not be long ere he should see or hear from his divorced wife, who would propose terms, if ransom was her game.

He was not a man to become unduly excited, or to allow any excitement to betray itself in his appearance. Calmness in a storm, was a decided characteristic of his make-up. Long experience in dealing with the rough and evil characters of the mountain mines, had taught him that coolness was a necessary qualification for a man to possess who proposed to hold his own against any and all odds.

In battle he was as cool as out, and in this matter of the abduction he was equally cool. For since he had learned that it was Louise Stapleton's plan to extort money from him, he had no fear that she would do Little Pearl any particular harm—at least, not until she had found that her game was fruitless, by which time the Sport hoped to be able to counterplot successfully.

In his room once again, he threw himself upon a couch, and dropped off into a light refreshing doze—a thing many another man could not have done.

When he awoke it was to find the light of another day shining in at his window.

Springing to his feet he hastily made his toilet, and was about to leave the room, when two things lying upon the center-table attracted his attention.

One was a neat package about four inches square—the other was a sealed envelope, addressed to Gilt-Edged Dick.

In great curiosity the Sport picked up the package, and on tearing off the wrapper beheld lying in his hands a number of neatly folded five-hundred-dollar notes—twenty, altogether, and the same evidently that he had lost in the game with the gambler, Smith.

Along with the bills was a note which read as follows:

"MR. GILT-EDGED DICK:

"Enclosed find the money that John Smith won from you. I procured it at the risk of my life, but that is nothing, for I would risk it many times to help you. I did not find you in the cavern, so I

bring it to you. Look out for Jabez Carter, for he is in town, and will shoot you, or provoke you to a quarrel, at sight. When you need me, you will find me on hand, but so disguised that you will not recognize me, unless you have sharp eyes.

"I am ever your true friend,

"CORAL CARTER."

Gilt-Edged Dick gave vent to a low whistle of surprise, but did not immediately speak his thoughts. Instead, he tore open the sealed envelope, and took therefrom a letter, which, on examination, he found to be from Idaho Kit.

It read as follows.

"SIR SPORT: Look sat for breakers ahead. Ther's goin' ter be a final effort ag'in' ye, an' ye'll hav' ther three or more ter look out fer. Brace up, and count strong on Idaho Kit, ef et cum's ter bizness. Luk out fer J. Bez Carter—he's a cuss on wheels, an' then thar's two others gettin' reddy fer ther war-path. I opine they calkylate ter hist ye out o' town, but freeze to it, like grim death to a nigger, an' I'll be thar.

"Truly, IDAHO KIT."

Gilt-Edged Dick smiled, as he read the note, penned as it was in a neat feminine hand, but characteristic of just such a wild, harum-scarum girl as was Idaho Kit.

"She is a clipper, is that Kit!" his thoughts ran, "and I believe we have taken a mutual liking to each other. If she were not quite so rough in language, and had not been so long a world waif, I should—but bah! is not one venture of the kind enough, that I should want to try my hand again? I think so. I wonder how the money and the letter came here? Evidently I have had nocturnal visitors, or else they were sent up by a servant. A little inquiry into this matter may disclose a revelation."

Shoving the letter and the money into his pocket, Dick lit a cigar and sauntered down into the restaurant.

The genial proprietor was the first man he encountered.

"If you have a spare moment I'll borrow it," he said, coolly. "Did you send a letter and package up to my room during the night?"

"I did not. Why?"

"Oh! both of the articles were on my table this morning, and I did not know how they came there, so I thought I would inquire if you sent them up."

"Don't remember of having done so. Saw Idaho Kit leave the hotel—perhaps it might have been she who left them."

"Are you sure no other man or woman came up or down the stairs after I retired?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"Very well. Sorry to trouble you," and then the sport betook himself to the crowded eating rooms, where he breakfasted leisurely.

He then sauntered out upon the street to do a second morning cigar.

But, seeing Louise Stapleton coming up the street, he turned back to the hotel and ascended to his room. He calculated she would give him a call, and was not mistaken.

She was shown up by a servant, and entered without ceremony, to find the Sport ensconced in one easy-chair, with his heels elevated upon the top of another, engaged in smoking and reading.

He glanced up as Miss Stapleton entered, and then resumed his paper, saying:

"Oh! it's you, is it? I told your mother my washing would not be ready until one to-day. You are ahead of time."

"Sir!" Miss Stapleton exclaimed, flushing angrily. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you cannot get my wash until one P. M.," the Sport replied, coolly, without raising his eyes. "It will greatly please me if you will wait until then, as I am very busy, now!"

"Indeed!" Miss Stapleton sneered, hotly; "whom do you take me for?"

"I believe you are Miss Muckalee, the washerwoman's errand girl, if I am not greatly mistaken," Webster averred, taking another survey of the intruder through his gol-rimmed glasses.

"No! I am not Miss Muckalee, nor any other Biddy!" the financier's daughter snapped, angrily. "You need not pretend that you don't know me, Richard Webster, for you do."

"Well, now, I am sure I have not the honor of your acquaintance, if I am so deceived in your being the washerwoman's girl. Perhaps you will favor me with your name, then?"

"My name, sir, is Louise Stapleton. Once it

was Louise Webster—"

"But the cruel formalities of the great and comprehensive law caused a radical metamorphosis, I believe," the Sport replied,

coolly taking the cigar from his lips, and blowing a cloud of perfumed smoke into the air. "There is a chair, Miss Stapleton, if you

choose to occupy it. Did your trip of last evening agree with you?"

"Yes, I believe it did," Louise responded with biting sarcasm. "I enjoyed it, amazingly."

"The more, perhaps, because you supposed you were striking me a blow, I dare say," Gilt-Edge suggested, quietly.

"Undoubtedly. Will you tell me how you learned so much? Surely it was not a talent for guessing."

"Oh! no. I never claimed to be as transparently bright as some people that I have met—you for one. Still, I am not a fool, to be overpowered by one weak woman and a man, and cast into a bedroom, bound and gagged. I presume you have overestimated your strength, Miss Stapleton."

"Not in the least, Dick Webster. Since you seem to know a great deal, perhaps we can come to terms!"

"Perhaps not. I am not in a mood for bargains, at present. You will do better to call some time in the future."

"Then you are not anxious about the child?"

"Not in the least. You have left her in safe hands, and I know she will be well taken care of."

"Bah! you don't know where she is!"

I dare-say not!" Dick replied with a peculiar smile. "But it will not take me long to find her."

"When you find her she will be dead!" the financier's daughter hissed with sudden fierceness. "Do not think to trifile with me, Dick Webster, for you will fail. I hold the best hand, and the largest number of tricks, and unless you disgorge handsomely, the brat shall die, and be buried where you can never look upon her face. I swear it, by all I hold sacred."

"Humph! your oath is of but little account, but were it of great value, I should not heed it, any the more," Gilt-Edge replied, calmly. "I have no fear of you, woman, although I believe you so evil as not to hesitate at any crime. I have no fear for my child, and as to yourself, if you go to ambling around me too freely, you'll get hurt. I never harmed a woman, yet, but it will not require a great deal of provocation on your part to cause me to get up and eject you from the room. There is the door yonder—you will favor me if you will use it!"

"Then you won't come down, in order to secure the child's release?"

"Not a cent's worth, my woman. You are playing a desperate game, but you have encountered at least one breaker in your path."

"Then the brat shall die!" the tigress cried, savagely. "I will see to it myself, that you never look upon her face, again."

And turning, the financier's daughter swept from the room, with a mocking laugh.

After she had gone, Gilt-Edged Dick gazed out of the window, thoughtfully, and watched her go up the street, until she was lost from view.

"She is indeed a tigress!" he muttered. "It was lucky that I ever got a divorce from her, or my life would have been a living hell. Now I must hunt up the idiot, and have him watch her and the man Doud. A precious pair they are, but they shall find that Gilt-Edged Dick will match them to the last."

After a glance into the mirror to see that his appearance was presentable, the Sport once more descended to the street.

As he stood upon the steps of the Tontine, he saw a party of six men, among whom were Dudley Doud and Horrible Hank, approaching.

At first he thought nothing of it, but when he saw that they were aiming for the place where he stood, it occurred to him that some new act of deviltry was afoot.

And this suspicion was confirmed when Dudley Doud sprung upon the platform, crying:

"Hurrah! hurrah! Seize him, boys! This man is Jabez Carter, the road-agent!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE SPORT'S ARREST—IDAHO KIT'S REVELATION.

SIMULTANEOUS with the major's order, five of his companions sprung forward, and ere Gilt-Edged Dick could pull a weapon, they were grappling with him.

A man of prodigious strength, he endeavored to hurl them off, but their numbers were too many for him, and he was forced to succumb.

A crowd had instantly collected, upon the major's cry, and many curious eyes were fastened upon the Sport.

But they were disappointed in their expectation to see him rave. As cool, literally, as an iceberg, was he, a sardonic smile hovering beneath his heavy blonde mustache.

"Perhaps you will condescend to explain the meaning of this assault, my beauty," he said, addressing the major, when they had succeeded in securing his arms behind his back.

"Humph! The meaning is that you have played the last card in your pack, and are going to swing!" the major answered. "Your last little robbery of the Leadville stage, early this morning, was the straw that broke the camel's back, and we cast aside our mercy for you, and now propose to let justice have its long-coveted reward."

"Robbery! Leadville stage! What do you mean?" the Sport repeated.

"I mean, if you want it straight from the shoulder you can have it!" the major growled back. "You are Jabez Carter, the road-agent, under your guise of a Sport, and last night you and your men robbed the treasure-box of the stage below here, and appropriated wealth to the amount of five thousand dollars or over. And now that we've caught you, we propose to do the square thing by giving you a decent send-off."

"I am not Jabez Carter," the Sport returned, coolly. "I am Richard Webster, the Mountain Detective, and I can prove it by papers which I have on my person. This last little game of yours, major, won't work; it is too transparent."

"Oh! but it will work," the major retorted, triumphantly. "I don't care how much proof you have got—I have enough to offset it. I have one of your own band, who will turn State's evidence, and swear that you are Jabez Carter."

"Ah!" the Sport exclaimed. "Then lead on, please, if you propose to give me a trial. I am anxious to see this thing through."

"No trial is necessary," the major allowed, with a devilish grin. "We've got the oath o' one o' yer men, an' that's all's needed to hang you."

"Bet ye five dollars to a cent you lie—five dollars more to a cent that the Gilt-Edge never was born fer tight rope exercise—five dollars, ag'in, to a cent, that I can lick the orneriness galoot as sez he was!"

And then into the midst of the crowd Idaho Kit pushed her way, and stood confronting the major and his party, with flashing eyes, and form drawn erect, while in either hand she clasped a cocked revolver.

On hand was she, and ready, evidently, for business.

"Who be you, and what in the devil do you want?" the major growled, not relishing the interference by this sharp-tongued Girl Sport.

"Waal, neow, I reckon you know me. My handle's Idaho Kit, fer short. I've got several other appellations, but Idaho Kit suits me best. As to what in the devil I want, I don't want anything in the devil, but would like to take the devil out of you. An', w'at's more, I'll bet five dollars ten a red cent that I can polish you off in less time than it takes an alligator ter swaller a nigger. Want to bet, my honeysuckle?"

"Get out of the way and mind your business," the major ordered, savagely. "Come, boys; trot the road-agent along!"

"Whoa! I say nixy!" Kit cried, sharply, as she brought her revolvers to a level with the major's heart. "Move one inch, ye seventh son of a seventh son-of-a-gun, and I'll pepper yer hash till ye'll hev the dyspepsia for all time an' eternitry. When I say ye can go, ye can scoot out two-forty on the hum stretch. But the fast galoot as offers ter wiggle a toenail—he's the merry cherubim I'm goin' ter transform inter a funeral."

"See here! What do you want?" the major remarked. "What right have you to interrupt the course of the law, woman?"

"I'll darned quick show ye, if ye give me any o' yer sass!" Kit responded. "What I want, is fer this Sport ter hev a fair trial, an' he's goin' ter hev it. So, march along now, ter the court-house, or wherever ye hold yer funerals, and I'll keep yer covered. The first sign o' shenanigan that I see, I'll salt ye so that ye'll keep till old Gabriel blows his fish-horn. One—two—three—march!"

And they did march.

Not one was there who did not fear the Girl Sport—not one who did not believe that she would salivate them according to her promise, should they disobey her.

So they marched down the street, before her, looking sheepish enough, while the crowd brought up the rear, yelling and hooting in derision.

Gilt-Edged Dick walked silently beside the Girl Sport, wondering what would be the issue.

He realized that he was in a tight situation, and could see no immediate way of escape from it, if they refused to recognize his detective certificate from the Governor of the State.

What was the game of this eccentric Girl Sport, he could not imagine, but he had confidence that she would in some way clear him.

It was a rare spectacle to see a single woman—and a mere girl at that—marching a pack of rough, lawless men through the main street of "the electric city"—it was a side scene in the drama of wild life in the mines, and the people cheered vociferously.

The only court-house the town then afforded was an empty store, and into this Idaho Kit marched her posse, and placed them upon the stand, ready to be sworn.

Then it was half an hour before the judge and State's attorney could be found, the former inндividually being highly intoxicated.

He was a Californian of Herculean proportions, and was not choice of the language he used, which was exactly suited to the town, over which he held sway as supreme magistrate—and his name was Joe Slum.

By the time everything was in readiness for the trial, the little room was packed full of people, and the street outside was proportionately packed with spectators.

No little amount of interest was there excited in the case of the Gilt-Edged Sport, who had in his short stay in Leadville aroused a feeling of admiration for himself, at least among a large class of the citizens.

No man quite so cool had they ever seen, except it was the Road Prince, Deadwood Dick—and this Gilt-Edged Sport was as brave as he was cool.

Therefore they were interested.

A brave man riveted their attention and admiration, even though he might be the greatest villain.

It had been proven that he was no coward, and the sympathies of the people were strong toward him, be he road-agent or not. And then, a great majority believed in his innocence.

When everything was in readiness, the judge arose from his seat and glanced over his audience.

"Ahem!" he said, with a clever judicial statesmanship and a drunken "hic." "If that's any cuss as wants justice, let him state his case and plank a V., an' I'll render a decision. No tick here." Then he sat abruptly down.

"I'll open this yere case, ef ye please," Idaho Kit said, rising. "Ther gilt-edged galoot yonder ar' accused o' bein' Jabez Carter, ther road-agent, an' I, fer one, want ter hear ther testimony, an' then offer a leetle myself."

"Keerect! Who's ther plaintiff?" the judge grunted, nearly pitching from his judicial pulpit, so full was he.

"I am," Dudley Doud said, rising. "I wish to offer that the defendant in this case is the same notorious road-agent, Jabez Carter by name, who last night robbed the Leadville stage. For proof of this I offer one of Carter's own band, Jenkins by name, who has turned State's evidence, and is willing to swear that this same Gilt-Edged Dick is none other than his commander, Jabez Carter, in disguise."

"Keerect!" the judge growled, turning his back to the audience and taking a nip from a pocket bottle. "Let ther son of a sea-cook rise an' be swearred."

A villainous-looking ruffian arose and was duly sworn, and after hesitating under the stern gaze of the judge, he began:

"I am Thomas Jenkins, and for over a year, until to-day, have been a member of Jabez Carter's band of outlaws. Last night I helped Carter rob the stage, an' when I went to camp my conscience began to smite me, an' I suffered like a man wi' ther jimmies. This mornin' I pulled out from camp, resolved to lead a Christyan life, an' meetin' ther major, I offered to turn State's evidence an' betray Carter, ef he would see that I got off free. So we cum inter town an' found Carter in their disguise o' Gilt-Edged Dick. I swear to his identity as the same Carter who has all along been our captain."

"Enough!" the judge grunted. "Send the feller ter jail, ter await my decision. Let some one else testify."

"That's all I have to offer," the major said. "I think it is conclusive evidence."

"I think not!" Idaho Kit spoke up. "Ef you please, your honor, I happen to know that the testimony just offered is a cussed lie, and that the witness never was a member of Jabez Carter's notorious band of outlaws. There now!"

"Hurrah! (hic) fer ther gal!" his judgeship hiccupped; for be it known the judge was a

widower, and an ardent admirer of female loveliness, such as was combined in the Girl Sport. "Tell us heer how ye know et's a lie, bloom' beauty."

"Yes! prove your stout assertion, young woman!" the major demanded, beginning to fear that his cause was lost—that his second attempt against Gilt-Edged Dick was a failure.

"Of course I will," Kit answered, unabashed. "I reckon when I launch inter a thing I sail thru it, fer keeps. In ther first place, I know that Gilt-Edged are a detective an' a sleuth. Mebbe he ain't well known to ye, heer, but go up Nor'west further, and you'll find by inquiry that he has made his mark and left a spotless reputation in many a mining town. That he isn't Jabez Carter, I also know, for the very thing that brought him down into the carbonaceous regions was to look up this notorious Jabez Carter, and bring him to justice—a thing that thus far he has not been successful in doing."

"But what proof have we of this?" Dudley Doud demanded, savagely.

"The proof is sure enough," Kit replied, with a cool laugh, for I am Jabez Carter's daughter!"

A murmur of astonishment ran though the audience, at this announcement—even the Gilt-Edged Sport gave vent to a low whistle indicative of his surprise.

"Enough!" the Judge yelled, descending from his stand—"ther court is out, an' I'm dry. Who sez likker? Ther Gilt-Edged Sport is free, an' so's whisky, ter them as has got plenty o' wealth. By-by, boys! Call ag'in."

And then the big Californian wended his way out of the building, intent upon finding a saloon, wherein to procure liquid consolation to slake the inordinate thirst of his inner man.

Dudley Doud turned to Gilt-Edged, a malicious expression upon his face.

"Twice, and I have failed, my gay cavalier. Look out for the third; I'll put you below ground, then."

"Oh! you will, eh," Dick replied, calmly. "Look out that it is not three times and out with you."

"No, ye won't tech that Sport, Dudley Doud, ye cussed ruff!" Idaho declared, stepping up and shaking her pretty fist under the nose of the major. "No ye won't, I say. I constitute myself ther natteral guardian an' protector o' this Gilt-Edged, an' when ye propogate his funeral, ye've got ter arrange for mine too, I tell ye. Come! slide off with ye, ef ye don't want me ter salivate ye fer all ye're wuth. I've a notion to, as it is!"

And up came a cocked revolver in her hand to a level with the major's breast.

And the major with a sullen curse moved off. He probably saw the best reason for so doing, in the fact that the Girl Sport meant business.

With him also dispersed the crowd, until Kit and Gilt-Edged Dick were the only ones left standing in the court-room.

Then it was that the blonde Sport turned to the dare-devil, and took her hand in his, pressing it warmly.

"Kit, my girl, I thank you more than I can ever express in words, for the aid you have lent me on these several occasions, and if you will name a reward, no matter how big, if I can I will pay it!" he said, earnestly, gratefully.

"Not a cent do I want!" was the reply. "Perhaps I shall yet call upon you to fight for me, as in coming here to-day, to rescue you, I have broken faith with my father, and incurred his bitter, life-long hate. Even now he is in this town, searching for me, no doubt, with murderous intent!"

"Fear not, then, my dear girl, for he shall not harm you while I am around. Come! let us go to the Tontine, and I will speak to the proprietor that you have rooms where you will not be disturbed."

"No! no! I could not do that. My reputation is not enviable now, although God knows, it is without cause. Were I to even glance at the hotel where you stop, a thousand tongues would quickly attack me. No, I must not do that, although I am grateful for your offer of protection. I have yet one more mission hereabouts, and then I am going to pull out—I know not where, but anywhere to escape the vengeance of the man who calls himself my father."

"I, too, am going to leave—going back into the mines of the North-west," Gilt-Edged Dick said, thoughtfully. "Now, if you must go, I will not detain you, but I want you to promise me one thing—that you will see me again before you leave for good. I wish to have a longer talk with you, than has yet been my privilege."

A faint blush stole upon the girl's cheek, and

her eyes assumed a happy expression as she glanced into his own.

"I promise you that," she said, then, turning, left the court-room.

CHAPTER XIII.

CONCLUSION.

In the meantime, the real Jabez Carter was elsewhere.

He had come into the town previous to the arrest of Gilt-Edged Dick, and had gone to the hotel where Oliver Stapleton stopped. A few inquiries put him on the track, and later, he entered the financier's room, without the customary ceremony of knocking, to find Oliver Stapleton and his daughter seated at a late breakfast.

"Sir! what mean you by this intrusion?" the financier exclaimed, haughtily, rising from his seat.

"Oh! pray, do not let me disturb you," the road-agent said, politely, helping himself to a chair. "Finish your repast, and then we'll have a sociable little talk."

"I am finished already. Proceed with what you have to say, and make it very brief, as I have my time occupied by business of much more importance."

"Oh! you have, eh? Well, I'll try to make this as important as possible. First of all, do you recognize me as any one you have known in former years?"

"I do not. My memory is not at all retentive of persons or events."

"Perhaps you remember that you once had a foster-brother, named Guy Malvern."

"Guy Malvern!" the speculator exclaimed, with a start—"you, Guy Malvern, sir? Impossible!"

"By no means impossible. I am indeed Guy Malvern, and the same foster-brother whom you used to hate, and who used to hate you, so cordially. Perhaps as Jabez Carter, the road-agent, I am changed, but you remember me, all the same."

"I have heard of you, and heard no good. What brings you here?"

"I come to make a revelation that will startle you. That young woman yonder, is not your daughter!"

"Not my daughter, sir? What do you mean?" the financier cried.

"I mean what I say; that young woman is not your daughter. Let me explain:

"Many years ago, you and I were of the same family, and both loved the same maiden, whose name was Marie Melton. On account of this rivalry in love, we grew to hate each other. Of course you were the handsomer of the two—I never did lay claim to beauty—and you won Marie Melton for your wife.

"Do you remember, how, on your bridal night, I swore to be revenged?"

"I remember," Oliver Stapleton replied suddenly; "you never kept your promise, so why renew the feud at this late day?"

"I did keep my promise, in a measure!" Carter declared, with an evil leer. "I watched and waited, and when your first girl baby was born, I stole it, and substituted another in its place. The resemblance between them was so striking that the change was never noticed!"

"And this one I have always supposed to be my daughter—?"

"Is in reality a nameless creature whom I obtained from a foundling hospital, to meet the circumstance!"

At this juncture Miss Stapleton gave vent to a little hysterical shriek of horror.

"It's true!" Jabez Carter replied, "and there is only one way you can prevent the disgraceful thing from being heralded to the world. Only one way to save your reputation."

"And that way is by marrying me. To be sure I am a road-agent, but in my mountain stronghold I live in as much grandeur as a king in his castle. As my wife, you will be well treated, and life I will make as pleasant as a dream to you."

"And if I refuse?" Miss Stapleton demanded, deliberately, her face as white as marble.

"If you refuse," Jabez Carter replied—"if you refuse, I will have notices printed, and posted on every tree denouncing both you and Stapleton as adventurers and impostors, and you shall be made an object of scorn in the eyes of the people!"

"I will marry you, then, on one condition, sir road-agent," Louise replied, deliberately. "That condition is that you strike Gilt-Edged Dick a blow from which he will never recover.

I hate the name as a snake hates fire, and I will never rest until he is out of my sight and hearing."

"Give me his child, and you shall have your wishes fulfilled!" Jabez Carter said. "I, too, hate the Sport-detective, and with the child in my power can work him excruciating agony."

"Then it shall be as you wish," Louise said.

"But, hold! Before you go, you must tell what became of my own child!" Oliver Stapleton cried. "If this girl is not my daughter, where is she?"

"Go search in the streets and find a wild dare-devil creature they call Idaho Kit, and in her you will behold your own flesh and blood!" Jabez Carter answered.

Then, laughing triumphantly, he motioned for Louise to follow him, and left the room, she accompanying him out into the street.

The termination of a wild mountain gulch in the face of a rugged pile of rocks hundreds of feet in height. Below, two panting horses containing a man and a girl. Above, on a projecting ledge, in plain view, another man and a woman, the man holding in his arms a little girl, who was crying in alarm.

Such was the striking tableau presented, the man upon the ledge holding the child in front of him as a shield—the man in the gulch below holding a rifle in his clenched hands, in a state of indecision.

"Surrender!" he cried, sternly. "You have run to the end of your rope. Throw down your weapons and descend from your perch, or by heaven! I will shoot you in your tracks, so sure's I'm Gilt-Edged Dick!"

"Ho! ho! you dare not!" Jabez Carter shouted, defiantly. "It is I who command, even though by long pursuit I have been cornered. Here in my arms I hold my authority—the key to your heart—your own child. Ha! ha! He laughs best who laughs last. It is I who am master—it is I who will drive you back from whence you came. See! the child calls to you in piteous accents. You shall have her—I will hurl her down to the bottom of the gulch at your feet, unless you promise to retreat—to leave these hills forever and ever, never to return!"

Gilt-Edged Dick reeled in his saddle!

He had not thought of this. It was like wakening from a horrible nightmare.

"Promise!" the road-agent yelled, noting with exultance the effect of his words—"promise, or by all I hold sacred, the brat will lie at your feet an instant hence, a crushed and bleeding mass of flesh and broken bones. Promise, I say—swear, by all you hold sacred that you and the girl beside you, Idaho Kit, will leave this neighborhood forever, and never seek to hunt or take me again, and I will spare the life of your child, and send her back to you, when it pleases me to do so. Swear, instantly, if you would not witness the sacrifice!"

And Jabez Carter raised the little form of Pearl Webster above his head, as if about to hurl her over the precipice into the gulch below.

"Stop! To save the life of my child I will promise all you have required!" Gilt-Edged Dick replied. "My word is as good as my oath! Come, Kit!" and the Sport turned his horse down the gulch.

"Stop!" Idaho Kit suddenly cried; "look! look!" and she pointed to the ledge.

Gilt-Edged Dick did look in time to see two bodies descending through the air from the great height, while with Little Pearl in his arms, Idiot Ike stood upon the ledge waving his hat, triumphantly!

It was a tableau of death and victory.

Jabez Carter and Louise were both killed in the terrible fall, and Little Pearl was restored to the arms of her father, by the idiot, who had in rescuing her, consummated a part of his revenge. The remainder of it was done in one dark night—or, at least, Oliver Stapleton was found dead in his bed with a knife in his heart.

Dudley Doud suddenly ended his career, about the same time, in a Leadville gambling-house, by blowing his brains out. Cause unknown.

Later still, Gilt-Edged Dick led to the altar no less a personage than the Girl Sport, Idaho Kit, after which they set out into the interior, accompanied by Little Pearl, who grew very fond of her new mamma.

And wishing them the happy future they surely deserve, we ring the curtain down.

THE END.

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